

Common Interests

A 9/11 Novel

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This is a fictional narrative wrapped around the real crimes of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the 2008 financial crisis. A smattering of other real events, institutions, entities, and people have also been included.

Common Interests

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Part One
Chapter 1

Pakistan border with Afghanistan near Khyber Pass
June, 1979

“Your cause is right and God is on your side!” said the stern-faced man with Eastern European roots as he pointed an authoritative finger towards the heavens.

A split-second pause and the translator was finished yak-yak-yaking. Then came the applause. Under a crystal-clear blue sky, men in beards and turbans clapped and grinned. They didn’t know this stranger from a strange land. All they knew was that life under Soviet occupation was hell on Earth. They were desperate. They were pawns in the dirty, bloody game of geostrategic chess.

The pea-green suits of the Pakistani military brass played their part. They shook hands and smiled for the cameras.

Brzezinski kept his eyes covered with shades and, surrounded by his underling entourage, made his way back to the chopper. PR time was over. It was time to get down to business. The world would never be the same.

ONE HOUR LATER
Pakistani Intelligence Office
Peshawar, Pakistan

Brzezinski took note of the shoddy door as he entered the meeting. He thought to himself, “These guys want nukes, and they can’t even get a door on straight.”

A small cadre stood to greet the National Security Advisor of the Carter Administration. There were two Americans and two Pakistanis.

“That was a rousing speech to rile up the troops,” the middle aged American quipped as he grinned at the stern Brzezinski.

“I hate PR stunts,” came the curt reply. “But it was necessary.”

The men took their seats. General Rahman, dressed in stiff and starched military regalia, leaned forward on the long oak table and said, “On behalf of President Zia, we would like to formally state our support in the war against Communism. We are ready to assist in any way that we can.”

Zbigniew Brzezinski kept his icy eyes zeroed in on General Rahman. He had all his moves calculated in advance. He was in control, and he knew it. “General Rahman, as you might know, there has been some hesitancy on the part of the Carter Administration to do what is necessary in the fight against Communism in Afghanistan. However, we are taking measures to make sure that proper funding, equipping, and training of the Mujahideen freedom fighters takes place one way or another. You’ve already been acquainted here with Mr. Cogan from the CIA Near East division as well as our young special forces soldier here, Mr. Vickers.”

Rahman nodded and gestured towards the young, long bearded, crazed-eyed warlord next to him and said, “And one of the freedom fighters you speak of, Mr. Hekmatyar, I can assure you looks forward to working closely with our friends at the CIA.”

Vickers grinned brashly and leaned back. Cogan and Zbig locked eyes. The steely Zbig couldn’t help but smirk a tad as he responded, “You think I don’t know who he is?” This brought open laughter from the American contingency. Like they were sitting in the presence of one of the most ruthless Afghani warlords and didn’t know it.

Cogan slicked his hair back and said, “He’s here because we know exactly who he is. He’s someone who can get the job done. General Rahman, I will be your liaison for coordinating

operations. Young Mr. Vickers here will be our lead trainer here in Pakistan along with your ISI core.”

Vickers smiled sharply at Hekmatyar and beamed at him with beady eyes. Hekmatyar’s stone face didn’t flinch. The bullish Afghani was bold, ruthless, cunning, and well-connected. He wasn’t there for freedom fighting. He was there for his own self interest, just like everyone else in the room. War was the best racket in town. The only difference was, he didn’t bullshit like these other tools. Vickers knew this. Vickers was young, ambitious, cunning, intelligent, and loved the thrill of blowing shit up. Vickers thought Hekmatyar was amusing and looked forward to raising hell with this brown butcher. Vickers knew he was about to get carte blanche and was relishing the moment.

General Rahman raised his pointy chin, “There has been some concern regarding financing. If Carter doesn’t make any official aid available, how can we be assured that enough assistance will be given to our efforts here in Pakistan?”

Cogan’s eyes took careful examination of the brutal Hekmatyar as he answered, “Carter will do what is necessary. In the meantime, our Saudi allies have assured us of generous financial support.”

Rahman was pleased by this. Rahman had dollar signs flashing in his eyes. Did he dare push further? “Of course, the only other issue that I suppose needs attention, is the facilitation of Pakistan’s nuclear development.”

Zbig stared him down. Silence cut the room. The Afghani warlord embraced the tension. Vickers relished the poker game between these self-righteous bullshitters. “I’m sure if things proceed well in our joint efforts against Communism, then President Carter will make generous concessions,” Zbig finished gruffly.

Chapter 2

Oval Office
Washington DC
July 3, 1979

Zbigniew Brzezinski set the multi-billion dollar document in front of President Carter. They looked at each other for a moment across Carter's desk. Carter did his dopey but lovable southern grin.

Carter spoke nervously, "The political ramifications of this could be disastrous. We're talking about arming and training an Islamist guerrilla army?"

"They're not Islamist. Far from it. They're a mix of freedom fighters and self-interested zealots. You take the good with the bad. The final outcome is what matters, and that is the end of the Soviet empire. The political ramifications of not pledging your support could be even more disastrous."

Carter looked at the crisp page on his desk, then back at his trusted advisor. Zbig thought to himself about what a wishy-washy pussy Carter was.

Zbig got impatient. "We're doing this one way or another, so I suggest you just sign the damn paper and move on to other matters."

Carter sighed. He knew his iron-faced advisor was right. This would happen overtly or covertly. And he didn't want to appear weak on Communism. Zbig grumbled. Jimmy C signed. An official partnership was cemented. A Middle East mercenary army was born.

Jalalabad Afghanistan
November 1979

Intel said this was the best point in the city to penetrate. This was a soft spot in the Soviet security perimeter surrounding the city. This would be the target area to test some of the new toys and new recruits. They'd shot up some defenseless villages before this, just to get a taste for blood.

Hekmatyar watched from a safe distance with military grade binoculars fresh from Uncle Sam's vast tentacles. Around a hundred teenagers and twenty-somethings brandishing machine guns were hungry for commie blood. As they charged the outskirts of the city, they fired indiscriminately into buildings. Bullets splattered brains and grenades burst buildings with ferocious fire. Debris flew and dirtied the heavenly blue.

Children screamed, arms flew, women bled. The noise was deafening as the unison of thunderous weapons went pop-pop-pop. This was guerrilla warfare. This was the bloodletting that Hekmatyar thirsted for.

Soviet soldiers came trotting out of nowhere and started spraying AK wickedness in all directions. Their resistance came quicker than the teenage mercenaries had expected. Most of them panicked, some of them splattered, and the survivors ran.

The Butcher was happy. It was enough to get the reds attention. This was necessary to provoke the Ruskies into a Vietnam-like escalation.

About half the boys made it back to The Butcher at the designated meet-up spot. One of the boys was fourteen. He was crying and shaking. The Butcher shot him in the head. The other boys took note that such emotions were not tolerated. The mercs soaked their adrenaline with Jack Daniels.

Khabul, Afghanistan
December 10, 1979

Soviet tanks came rolling in. Soldiers poured in in droves and pounded their boots on the ground in lockstep. Things were escalating quickly. Certain elements within the Russian ruling elite were tired of getting sucker punched in the nose by the CIA's mercenary army. They didn't care about the civilian slaughters that were going on at the hands of the Vickers and Hekmatyar hell raisers. What the Russian oligarchs cared about was resources. Oil, gas, minerals, and opium. And now all of it was under attack and something had to be done. So they sent in their own mercenaries, better known as the Russian Army.

Saudi Arabian Embassy
Washington DC
December 1980

"You're not doing enough," Carlucci spoke with a gangster grin as he eyed his counterpart, Turki bin Faisal, director of Saudi General Intelligence.

Faisal shrugged his broad shoulders and replied with his thick British accent, "We've already invested tens of millions of dollars. And what good is it doing anyone in my family, killing a bunch of peasants and the occasional Russian soldier in Afghanistan?"

Carlucci relaxed and leaned back in his overstuffed leather chair. He just stared at Faisal with his icy eyes and looked as smug as possible. He knew he held all the cards. He was the Deputy Director of the CIA. He liked to fuck with people's heads, so he just stared until Faisal broke.

"What? What more can I do? Tell me, Frank. Damnit, tell me."

The brash Carlucci put a thoughtful finger to his lips, straightened his wide spectacles, leaned forward, and said, "First of all, who the fuck do you think buys all that God damned oil from your little clique? I hope you're smart enough to know that all those billions of barrels are worth nothing if there is no one to buy them. Secondly, you're already getting a cut from the dope biz. Now let me ask you some questions." He paused for effect.

Faisal gulped air and continued his piss scared freeze. Carlucci was enjoying putting this overgrown spoiled oil prince in his place.

"Do you grow poppies?"

Gulp. "No."

"Do you process poppies into heroin?"

Sigh. "No."

"Do you transport heroin, sell it, then arrange for the money to magically become legit?"

No answer. Silence speaks volumes.

Frank was getting a little wild-eyed. He was enjoying it a bit too much. "So all you do is sit on your pretty little towel-headed ass and have a five percent cut of The Company's heroin trade fall magically into your network's pockets, so you can live your lazy, self-serving, debaucherous lifestyle, and you think that it isn't doing you any good to invest a few million dollars in our anti-Communist crusade?"

Faisal looked at the floor. Carlucci told him to look him in the eye. He locked eyes and said he was sorry, that he would see what he could do. Carlucci told him that wasn't good enough.

"I want names," Carlucci demanded. "Who the fuck are you going to send? I need recruiters, financiers, and soldiers. I know you don't have any real soldiers in Saudi Arabia, but humor me. Some warm bodies that can at least serve as human shields for my real soldiers. Now, give me names."

Faisal's eyes darted around. "Perhaps Osama Bin Laden might be a good choice. He is a"

Carlucci cut him off, “I know OBL. You think I don’t know who the hell he is? I also know that he’s on the outs with his family, so basically, you’re sending me a runt.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, sir.”

“Well, I would. He’ll do, for a start. His family has plenty of legit money. It’s still early, but I’m telling you, stop fucking around. We can’t afford to waste any time.”

Chapter 3

Mujahideen Training Camp
Peshawar, Pakistan
July 1982

The sun was scorching triple digits down on the motley crew of spectators. Vickers squinted as he tried to watch the landing of the newest arrivals. The Butcher was squatting down and rhythmically stabbing his bowie knife into the ground. General Rahman stood with hands on hips and was flanked by two body guards.

There was tension in the air. There had been an unspoken feud between Vickers and The Butcher. For all they had in common, they both shared animosity for various reasons. Vickers was jealous of The Butcher because Hekmatyar took a bigger slice of the loot than Vickers thought to be fair. He also thought that Hekmatyar was too indiscriminate in his targets. He seemed to murder more women and children than he did soldiers.

The Butcher held animosity towards Vickers. Vickers never went out on raids. Never risked his life. He stayed comfortably in the background, training, coordinating, and drinking. It was a posh gig compared to the long, hot, scorching missions that The Butcher went on. They had managed to keep things civil, based on mutual interests, like killing commies and stuffing their pockets with booty. But it was only a matter of time until the tension exploded.

Washington had grown increasingly impatient with the war effort. General Rahman had defended his position, saying there wasn't enough money or weapons. People in DC had put the blame on the Saudis and assured Rahman that reinforcements were coming, and in the meantime, to shut the fuck up and make due. Rahman said making due would not defeat international communism.

Dust swirled as the transport plane came to a less than graceful landing. Vickers laughed and shook his head. Rahman grimaced. Three tall, slender, long-bearded figures emerged and slowly stepped off the creaky transport plane. "All that money," Vickers thought, "and this is the best they can do for transport."

General Rahman was the first to greet the newcomers. "Professor Azzam, we have anxiously been awaiting your arrival. Osama, it is also a great honor to have you here." Azzam smiled broadly and his dark eyes twinkled as he said, "It is our honor to fight the godless Russians. You do great work here, general."

The Butcher greeted them next, more cordial than you might expect for someone that brutal. Vickers came last. He smiled, stuck out a hand, and with a hint of his southern drawl said, "It's about damn time you guys showed up!"

Awkward looks bounced between all. With a surprised and inquisitive face, Azzam asked, "And who might you be?"

"Michael Vickers, lead coordinator for our efforts here. As much as I'd like to chit chat, I believe there is some other cargo that came along for the ride with you gents. Might I have a look?"

The Butcher's face twisted. He couldn't believe how disrespectful this cocky young American was.

Osama gave a wide grin, gestured towards the craft, and responded, "By all means, it's your company's plane, go and have a look."

Vickers swaggered over to the dated craft and stepped inside. What he saw took his breath away. Pallets full of cash stacked to the roof. Boxes full of guns, ammo, explosives, and other war toys of interest. Last, but not least, pallets full of whiskey. The others stood behind Vickers and were equally in awe of the sight.

The consummate soldier turned around and gave a vicious grin like a kid in a candy store on ritalin. "You boys must've been real cozy on your ride over here," he smirked with a touch of irony.

Zawahiri joined in, "Would you like to hear the good news?" Vickers smirked and replied, "I thought I was just inspecting the good news. There's more?"

The normally stoic Zawahiri laughed as he found the American to be amusing. "Thousands of recruits will be arriving over the next few days. Allah has blessed our efforts."

Vickers cackled and said, "Ha, yeah, well, to hell with Allah. This is man's great work right here."

The Butcher began to charge towards Vickers. Azzam held out a lanky arm to cut him off. The Butcher stopped out of respect for the Islamic preacher. He growled and stared down Vickers. Vickers cocked his head back and grinned. He knew he couldn't be touched. He was too important.

Vickers showed teeth and asked, "So where are these recruits coming from?"

"Everywhere," Osama said with a twinge of British accent. "Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan. From all over the Middle East."

Vickers nodded approval and said, "That's good, now we can maybe make some headway. You new guys had a long trip, go ahead and kick back and relax. I'm sure our fearless leaders here can help you get comfortable." He gestured towards General Rahman and The Butcher. "I'll go ahead and start unloading the merchandise here. Can't waste any time. We gotta get our product moving the other way."

The crew walked off towards the inviting indoor accommodations which awaited them off in the distance. Vickers watched impatiently. When he thought things were clear he took the opportunity to stuff his pockets with stacks of bills. He was glad he was wearing cargo pants. He turned around into a knife at his throat.

"What you do?" Hekmatyar asked in broken English as he held the knife to the special forces soldier's jugular.

"Taking my cut."

"You get cut from Company. Not here. I take cut from here."

"You take too much."

"You no fight. You sit in office. Get more than you deserve. Next time, you get unplanned surgery."

The Butcher walked off. Vickers exhaled.

The pallets were put away in underground warehouses. Opium was loaded on the cargo plane and took off for Turkey to be processed. The core of the Muhajideen freedom fighters broke bread and shot whiskey. The clock was racing against the Soviet empire.

Chapter 4

Years passed. The Butcher and Vickers managed to not kill each other. The Butcher's body count went off the charts. He lived up to his name. Vickers coordinated air missions and made sure there were plenty of painkillers for the boys.

Countless bullets sprayed. Tens of thousands of corpses piled up. Thugs got rich. Families were wrecked. Soviet resources dwindled. Missiles flew and planes exploded. Schools and hospitals blew up. Soldiers popped pills and took shots. Heroin flooded the world. Spooks went HOO-raw! Pakistan got a nuke. Most Americans drank, yawned, and watched Cheers and Family Ties. Russians were on the verge of buying Levis and drinking Coke.

Afghan-Uzbek Bridge
February 15, 1989

Soviet tanks crawled across the bridge and left Afghanistan for Soviet territory. The war with the Russians was over. Flags waved, cheers echoed, and flashbulbs went pop-pop-pop. The Russian ruling class trembled. Foundations of an empire shook. Guns, drugs, mountains of cash, and butchers had triumphed. The media told everyone it was a great day for freedom, and most people believed it.

Berlin Wall
Berlin, Germany
November 9, 1989

Die wand muss gehen! That was the chant of choice among the tens of thousands gathered to watch the historic destruction of the Berlin Wall.

Bulldozers smashed through the concrete symbol of oppression and made the dust and rubble of history fly chaotically into the cool autumn air. People laughed, cried, hugged, kissed, drank, copulated, and felt a rush of intoxicating emotions. Drums were beaten on top of the wall. Chants wailed and flags and banners waved.

Tom Brokaw made it sound as exciting as eating oatmeal. Cameras rolled as crowds rocked and pushed. Interviews in thick German accents were given to the world. Checkpoint Charlie had never seen so much traffic in its bleak existence.

The Cold War was coming to an end. This was great for most, but not for all.

Part 2

Chapter 5

Caribbean Sea
December 1995

The indelible Mr. Crown threw his cards down in disgust, "Damn shame." His cadre had a good laugh at his expense. James Crown wasn't accustomed to losing. He was a corporate titan involved with defense contractor General Dynamics and also JP Morgan Bank.

Crown's business partner at General Dynamics, Frank Carlucci, replied smugly, "The way you play cards is something to be ashamed of, I agree completely,"

The pudgy Vincent Marafino from Lockheed Martin quipped as he puffed a fat Cubano, "Blame it on the scotch, James. I always do."

"I wasn't just talking about just the damn poker game," Crown said as he relaxed his broad shoulders and took another swig of scotch. "I was talking about money."

The slick-talking Rubenstein asked, "What money is that?"

Mr. Crown's face grew deadly serious. "Our money. You know we're all in the same boat."

Everyone chuckled. Mr. Gerstner joked, "That's a very astute observation from someone sitting on a yacht,"

Crown couldn't help but laugh. "You fuckin guys." He looked out over the moonlit waters and inhaled a deep patch of humidity. "What I mean is, it's a damn shame that all of our profits are down. Defense spending is down. The god damn cold war ended, and it's been downhill ever since."

The old men who comprised the multi-billion dollar poker team all nodded in agreement and grumbled as one can only do under the influence of some fine liquid confidence. Crown was right. They all had a vested interest in war, and the 1990s weren't good times for those involved in the war racket. The defense budget had been slashed consistently and considerably since the fall of the Soviet Union and members of certain board rooms were starting to feel the pinch. The men at this table all had common interests.

A red-faced Rubenstein pounded a fist on the table and loudly lamented, "And that SOB Clinton isn't as pliable as some thought when they backed him."

"There's gotta be a way," the deceptively humble looking character in the background added.

"Holy shit, Bob, you can talk?" Gerstner bellowed with a hearty chuckle. "A way to what, Bob? Get your mustache to grow thicker?"

The typically serious Bob Druskin from Citibank straightened his round spectacles and got a look of bemusement. Then his face straightened out to its unflappable form and he said, "A way to make enemies."

Eyes darted back and forth. Heads nodded slowly in thoughtful manners and lips pursed. Mr. Crown narrowed his eyes and said, "America needs an enemy."

"No," Carlucci said.

"No?" Crown asked, surprised.

"The world needs an enemy," Carlucci clarified.

David Rubenstein, who was partnered with Carlucci at an investment firm called the Carlyle Group, rubbed sweat from his brow and said, "Hypothetically speaking, correct?"

Marafino added as he took a swipe at his white hair, "I like speaking hypothetically. My lawyers say it's harder to be held liable if you speak hypothetically."

"Now just hold on a minute, fellas," Gerstner boomed. "Before we go solving all the world's problems with hypothetical scenarios, I must say this. Keep in mind the bigger picture."

“Clarify,” Marafino prompted.

Gerstner huffed and polished off his scotch. “Everything is going digital. Any grand ideas you boys come up with had better take that into account. Things are more complex now.”

Crown threw his long arms up and said with a laugh, “Oh, look at Mr. Technical from IBM here. Captain complexity, Louis Gerstner, ladies and gentleman!” Everyone gave mock applause.

“What I’m saying is,” Gerstner continued, “is that make sure whatever hypothetical thing you have in mind doesn’t screw up the opportunities that the digital age will represent. Trust me, you boys don’t wanna fuck that up, no matter how many bombs you sell. See the big picture.”

There was a brisk silence. The oligarchs were calculating. Water lapped against the hulking vessel. It’s funny how circumstances of environment can provoke certain thoughts.

Druskin prompted dryly, “The waves are relentless, never ceasing,”

“Perpetual, never ending,” Carlucci said with a deep look on his spectacled face.

“I have a riddle for you boys,” Druskin said expectantly.

Rubenstein commented sarcastically, “Oh boy, scotch, riddles, and poker,”

Druskin asked, “What enemy can never be defeated?”

The men gave pause. Damn scotch must’ve been going to the old man’s head.

Druskin offered help, “Think about the waves.”

Carlucci smiled broadly, “A perpetual enemy.”

Rubenstein loudly protested, “And can one of those exist? You guys are lettin the sauce talk.”

Druskin couldn’t help but laugh at his cleverness. “An enemy that doesn’t really exist, an intangible enemy. An abstraction. It can never be defeated, because it is not physical.”

Marafino patted his ponch and declared, “I need another drink to have any hope at figuring this one out.”

Druskin was enjoying watching his friends struggle with such a simple idea. “Think about what happened earlier this year, in OKC.”

Carlucci’s face lit up, “Terrorism?”

“Terror,” affirmed Druskin.

“Can never be defeated, at least not with physical violence,” Carlucci continued.

Crown leaned his long frame onto his elbows and said, “You guys are out of your god damned minds.”

Rubenstein yammered, “Yeah, look at what happened at OKC this year, and in ‘93 at the WTC. Same results. Anti-terror legislation failed, defense budgets dropped.”

Carlucci was focusing hard on a spot off in the distance. Without looking at anyone, he said with a twinge of fascination in his voice, “But there hasn’t been a focused effort to maintain the fear.”

“What?” came a chorus.

Carlucci continued, “What I mean is, there wasn’t enough sustained action in concert to maintain the fear. Not enough in the media, not enough financially, not enough in any aspect of the average person’s daily life.”

Druskin took a swig of his scotch and added, “And it wasn’t big enough. Half the people in this country can’t even find Oklahoma on a map. It would have to be something more psychologically engaging, let’s say.”

There was a moment of icy silence. Thoughts were starting to crystallize within the minds of these wealthy pragmatists.

Gerstner raised an eyebrow and said, “Now, gentlemen, we’re still speaking hypothetically, correct?”

Everyone nodded. “Good,” Gerstner continued. “So we must take into account the effects such an unfortunate incident would have on all sectors of the system.”

Marafino said, “That sounds reasonable.”

Carlucci clapped his hands and said, "The gift of understatement, Vince, well said. Yes, financial, social, political, and technological forces would have to be taken into account."

"Exactly," Crown said. "No one is interested in inadvertently tipping over the apple cart."

Rubenstein chuckled, "You guys are still out of your minds. Just how are you going to see which way the dominoes would fall that far into the future? At the very least, you can't predict social forces. Financial and technological, sure, to a certain degree, but not social, not yet."

Gerstner quickly retorted, "I beg to differ, my friend. You're partially correct, anyway. We cannot see such things, but machines can."

"Machines," Rubenstein said with mild disbelief.

"Yes," Gerstner continued, "there are machines with such capabilities."

"He's right," Carlucci agreed.

Crown joined in, "And hypothetically speaking, how would one gain access to one of those machines without raising suspicion?"

Everyone looked at Frank Carlucci. He was the obvious choice. He had been involved in a variety of alphabet soup agencies, with various titles throughout the years. CIA, DOD, Ambassador, not to mention think tanks. He was also currently on the board of defense contractor General Dynamics and a private equity firm called The Carlyle Group. Carlyle also held significant investments in the war industry. This guy was connected squared plus one. The others at this informal meeting of minds were more in the corporate world, where they could retain influence in the shadows. But not Frank. He went between both public and private worlds with uncanny social abilities, cleverness, and, when necessary, utter ruthlessness.

James Crown got a boyish grin on his face, "Frank."

The man of many faces said, "What."

"Frank, perhaps, just out of sheer curiosity and scientific inquiry, you might be able to find a way to run some hypothetical scenarios into one of those machines. I'm sure everyone here would be quite intrigued by your findings."

"Why me?" Frank asked.

Marafino giggled like a schoolgirl and said, "Oh, come on Frank, no one is better than you."

The others pet Mr. Carlucci's ego and urged him to just find some interesting information for them.

Carlucci took another shot of scotch to settle his nerves. He said, "I'll see what I can do." Then he dealt the cards and the game of high stakes poker went on until sunup.

Chapter 6

One Week Later
 Booz Allen Hamilton Offices
 Washington DC

Dov Zakheim thought it would be just another typical Tuesday at the office. He was happy to still be working in the private sector after so many years grinding away in the public arena of the DC megalith.

He greeted everyone with kind eyes and a judicious smile as he made his way towards his plush little corner of the corporate world. He stopped at his secretary's desk to see if there was anything urgent on the agenda. Paula stroked her brown curls, smiled, and said, "No, pretty slow day so far, sir."

Dr. Z nodded and casually walked into his office. He set his briefcase down, stretched, yawned, and glanced at his desk. Well organized, meticulous, but wait, what's this hand written note dead center of everything in red ink?

He was curious and picked up the note which read, "Lovey Dovey, it's been too long. Rock Creek Park. Noon. Alone. F"

"Shit," Dr. Zakheim said under his breath as he grabbed his chest. He picked up his desk phone and rang Paula. "Paula, was anyone in my office this morning?"

She took a moment to consider, then came back with an authoritative, "No, sir. Not that I'm aware of." A typical secretary in a typical office might ask why, but this was no typical office. Booz Allen Hamilton was one of the contractors that handled communications surveillance for Uncle Sam. Working there was a gray area, not really in the intelligence field, but not officially out, either. So questions were kept to a minimum.

Dov slammed the phone down and his cartoon face turned red and his neatly trimmed mustache twisted. He didn't know what this impromptu meeting was about, but he knew it was something that probably led down a dark tunnel.

2 hours later
 Rock Creek Park

Dov walked briskly to try and stay warm. Who the hell asks for a meeting outside in the middle of winter? Fucking Frank. After a few minutes, he decided to take a seat on a park bench. It was 12:03. He knew Mr. C would find him. Crazy spook. In spring or summer, he normally would have had a splendid view of the park, with plenty of greenery to admire. But not now. Fucking Frank.

"You're late," Frank said from behind. Dov got spooked and damn near jumped out of his seat. He turned around. Frank was dressed in a dark suit, as usual. Always the consummate professional.

"What the hell, Frank? Why are you always so damned creepy? Why did you break into my office? Couldn't we just meet at the office? Or at least in a coffee shop, where it's warm?"

Carlucci gave a snicker and said, "It's good to see you, too, Lovey Dovey."

"Fuck you, Frank. Tell me what this is all about so I can stop freezing my nuts off."

The dark-suited figure took a seat next to Dr. Zakheim. "The last thing I would want is for such an esteemed character like you, Dr. Z, to freeze his family jewels off, so I'll get right to it. I need a favor."

Z responded, "I'm so shocked. Can you be more specific?"

Frank leaned in close and whispered, "I need a little info. Someone high up in DOD that'll be, how shall we say, flexible. I'll need someone high in congress, too."

Dr. Z raised a dark eyebrow and said, “Is that all?”

“For now,” Frank said.

“Goodbye, Frank.”

“Thanks, Dovey.”

Chapter 7

Burning the midnight oil again. This was part of Dr. Z's job that was love-hate. It was a power trip to have access to files on the private lives of damn near everyone in the government control structure. And the higher the rank, the bigger the file.

He took another gulp of coffee and tapped his fingers anxiously on his desk. So far he hadn't come across anything too concrete in the DOD file. Just minor stuff like DUIs, some domestic incursions, petty stuff. Then Dr. Z just about spit out his coffee.

It was the Joe Ralston file. Joe was the Vice Chairman of The Joint Chiefs Of Staff. His crime? An affair with a CIA employee. The guy was either really ballsy or really stupid. Who does that? Dov took a deep breath and hesitated to look at the proof. It was one thing to read some text making such an accusation, but it was a different galaxy altogether to see the proof. Fucking Frank. Another love-hate thing in Dov's life, Frank Carlucci. What was he getting himself into?

He clicked the file of temptation. Dov winced and tugged at his thin mustache. There it was. Joe joltin away with a civilian employee from the CIA. Joe was a married man at the time. Adultery, on tape. That should do. That should grant some leverage, especially on a guy who has any ambition to not only keep his job but also to move higher in the ranks.

He'd seen enough. He made a note and moved on. Time for some dirt on the top brass in congress. This should be easier. Those guys don't get to their posts by being good little church boys.

Bingo. Bob Livingston, Representative from Louisiana, Chairman of The Appropriations Committee. His crime? The same. Adultery, and not just once. The video file list stretched more than the length of the screen. Only one view was necessary. Dov squinted and clicked nervously, anticipating something he didn't want to see.

The scene didn't disappoint. Who the hell has sex with their glasses on? And in an elevator? You dog, you. The woman looked trashy. More than likely a cheap whore. Louisiana was full of em. Couldn't wait to get to the room, apparently.

Dov copied the files onto a disc. Then he covered his electronic tracks. Dov shut the system down and wiped sweat from his thick brown eyebrows. Sometimes all-access wasn't pretty. This was one of those times, watching middle aged white men bangin away. He noted Livingston's name next to Ralston. He hoped this wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass. He hoped Frank wouldn't ask for anymore favors.

Chapter 8

Washington DC Suburbs

February 1, 1996

A fresh coat of snow smashed under the general's hefty hoofs. Joe Ralston carried a good frame and was crunching snow on his way to the mailbox at the end of his driveway. He'd done well for himself. A spot in an affluent neighborhood, a high military rank, and was certainly assured of getting a sweet gig with a defense contractor after his public life was finished. That's how the game worked. You play the game, you don't ask questions, you follow orders, and you get rewarded. Just like a dog.

Joe opened the mailbox. There was only one small, dark beige envelope inside, with no address on it. Big Joe's eyes lit up with emotion. He'd been in the game long enough to know that getting a "package" like this was a bad sign. He took a deep breath and dug his heels into the powder as he made his way back to the warmth of his stone-speckled home.

Once in, he didn't waste any time. He popped the envelope open and found a disc and a hand written note. The note said, "Let's keep this a private affair. You'll be picked up an hour after you receive this."

The stiff-jawed general's heart started racing. Was this a joke? If it was, big Joe didn't find it amusing. He raced over to his desktop computer in his private study and popped the disc in. A moment later, and he was watching himself commit adultery. His heart jumped into overdrive and he struggled to walk over and turn the thermostat down. His fear and confusion quickly turned to anger. How? Who? Why? Too many questions. He looked at his designer watch and gulped.

The next 60 minutes ticked by in torturous flashes of distortion and uncertainty. It was one of the few moments in his career when he didn't feel in control. The illusion of control can evaporate in a nanosecond, and when it does, it's an ego-shattering experience. Why did he have that affair? He always knew it would come back to haunt him, but he had no idea of the dark severity.

Joe looked nervously at his watch. 2 more minutes. Time to step outside. Whoever was playing this game with him no doubt functioned with military precision. He stepped outside into the crisp late-evening air. Some headlights approached slowly from down the street. A black Lincoln Town Car with blackout tint crawled to a slow stop in front of Joe's driveway.

Joe could feel his jaw tighten as he got in the passenger seat. A man with a stern face, a wry smile, and beady eyes sat at the controls and greeted his guest. "Thanks for coming, Joe."

The sturdy general tried to control his rage. He looked at the specimen who had picked him up. He looked familiar, but couldn't put a name on him. Joe responded. "Did I have a choice?"

Carlucci showed amused teeth and said, "There's always a choice. Do you want to get out of the car?"

Joe sighed and gave a bleak stare out his frosty black window. The CIA man laughed and said, "Good, I don't want you to get out, either. Not just yet anyway. First, we need to make a deal."

"A deal," Joe said. In his mind he was thinking, "with the devil."

Carlucci pulled up to a stop sign and wiped off his wide spectacles. "Yeah, a deal. It's really simple, actually. I need you to get some information for me."

Joe interrupted, "And what do I get in return?"

Frank put up a steady, wrinkly hand and said, "Whoa, a little anxious there, aren't we? Of course, I can't say that I blame you." He stopped talking and started laughing.

"What the fuck do you find so funny?" Joe asked, incredulous.

Carlucci was in fits. “You not only cheated on your wife, but you did it with a Company employee?”

Ralston cut off the cackling Carlucci, “I oughta bury you in the snow, old man.”

Frank’s demeanor did a 180. With ferocious eyes he turned to face the general, “Yeah, that’ll solve all of your problems. Bury me. See what happens, you fucking dog. Here’s the fucking deal, and no more interruptions. Is that clear, soldier?”

Joe’s eyes narrowed. He controlled his emotions and settled down. Frank patted his designer tie and continued, “There’s an envelope in the glove box. It has specific scenarios that need to be run through Sentient World Simulation. You know what that is, right?”

Joe nodded meekly and said, “Yeah, but as far as I know, it’s still in the experimental stages.”

Carlucci continued, “Yeah, I’m aware of that, but it’s the best we’ve got, so it’s the one we’re going to use. You are not to talk to anyone about the scenarios. You will have the scientists that run the SWS operation sign a non-disclosure agreement. You will let them know, verbally, as to the possible consequences of violating that agreement. I will expect to see you back at your home with the results within one week. If you are not back in one week, I will consider you to be a rogue and you will be dealt with accordingly. When you return with the results, you are to contact no one and will go nowhere. I will personally pick up the results from you within two hours of your return. Any questions?”

Joe looked the old man up and down and asked, “Yeah, what’s in it for me?”

“You get to keep your little affair quiet, keep your job, and at some point down the road, you might find yourself with some very lucrative positions in life. If you fail, you’ll be a tabloid wonder-boy, your career will finish, and your life will be a living hell.”

The general felt squeezed. The general loved his lifestyle and would do anything to keep it. The slick criminal driving the fancy wheels said, “I’ll take your silence as a yes.” He slammed on the breaks and continued, “It’s a nice night for a walk. See you in a week, general.”

Rather than argue the obvious facts that it was freezing out and that he was at least a couple of miles from home, General Ralston held his tongue and slipped out.

Chapter 9

Krannert School Of Management
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana

Sentient World Simulation was a data-crunching miracle. It was a simulated reality. It could take all known information about the world and make predictions about the future based on hypothetical changes in the global environment. Billions of people, places, things, thought patterns, personal relationships, beliefs, economic systems, political systems, and scientific facts were in the machine in order to present a “real-world” environment. A variable (event) could then be placed in the environment to see how that event would change the future. It could be something as mundane as Joe Average skipping breakfast or something as catastrophic as a terrorist attack. The future of the world would change based on hypothetical scenarios. This phenomenal wonder of science was still a work in progress in, of all places, Indiana.

Joe walked tall and proud. His extra starched military rags glistened in the bright halls of scientific academia. Big Joe didn't like talking to scientists. He thought they looked down on him. They made him feel inferior. This was a less than pleasant visit. He was being shown to the SWS lab by a fiery young redhead. He reminded himself why he was in the situation he was in, which gave him pause to even speak to her. They reached a double-door corridor at the end of the hall. She entered the numerical passcode, smiled, and let the officer into the hyper-cooled lab area.

Waiting for him was Dr. Alok Chaturvedi, the lead scientist on the project. The young Indian gave a warm greeting to his unexpected guest. A cordial smile came from the general and he thanked the doctor for meeting him on such short notice.

“Anything for our partners at the defense department. I understand it's a bit urgent.”

“Apparently,” The General said dryly.

The doctor said he'd like to get started right away and asked for the data that was to be fed into the simulation. The General told him that before that could happen, he needed a non-disclosure agreement signed. The doctor agreed and signed quickly. Then he was handed an envelope. Joe knew what was on those pages. He wasn't sure how this compartmentalized computer geek would react.

As he glanced over the scenarios, Dr. Chaturvedi's face slowly began to drop. He started nervously rubbing his shiny, bald, brown head and glancing nervously at Joe. Just before the shocked scientist was about to speak, Joe cut him off, “Remember what you just signed. We have a job to do, now let's do it.”

With his mouth gaping open, Alok said “Well, it's just hypothetical, right?”

Ralston glared with narrow eyes, “I imagine so.”

Alok stared up at the general and gulped. He was wishing he had a different job at the moment. Any job. Cleaning up bathrooms at a white trash bar would be better than this.

“How long until we have the results?” the stern general asked.

“48 hours, maybe less.”

“I'll check back with you tomorrow for an update. Any questions?”

The stiff scientist thought it might be better to not ask questions and gave a quick shake of the head.

Chapter 10

2 weeks later

General Dynamics Private Jet

41,000 Feet Cruising Altitude

James Crown leaned back in his oversize swivel chair. The corporate titan's face simmered with fascination and excitement as he examined the crisp report in his hands. Staring out the window was the man who had brought the good news, Frank Carlucci. He waited patiently for Crown's comments.

"Frank," came a deep voice as Crown peered over the page. "This is astonishing, much more than I had anticipated."

Frank said, "I'm pleased that you're pleased. Technology is great, isn't it?"

Crown nodded and took a deep huff of recycled air, "This presents great opportunities."

"A crisis always does," Frank confirmed.

"This is more than a crisis, Frank. This is a paradigm shifting event. And the timing couldn't be better, with the transition to a digitally-controlled society. It's the perfect storm."

Carlucci questioned, "Do you think it's a storm that can be managed?"

Crown viewed his counterpart with narrow eyes, "Hypothetically?"

Carlucci shot his eyebrows up and said, "Fuck, James, we're on a god damn private jet. There aren't any unwanted ears up here."

James stood up his long frame and went to fetch some booze. "Feel like a drink, Frank?"

The spectacled spook accepted. Mr. Crown made two Manhattans and slouched back down into his cozy perch. "Let's weigh some pros and cons, shall we?"

They bantered back and forth.

The positives.

DOD spending would skyrocket within three years of the event. Global debt would increase exponentially. The amount of data made available over digital architectures in the social and economic sphere would increase at a blistering pace. Global sympathy would facilitate a carte blanche US foreign policy for decades. This terrorist event wasn't just a great excuse, it was the mother of all trump cards. China and Russia would be forced to take greater cooperative measures. Much easier access to Eurasia would be created.

"What about the negatives?" asked Crown.

The master war gamer replied, "They appear to be negligible."

Mr. Crown glanced back at the astounding analysis. He peered back at Carlucci and said, "It says here that there could be an increase in resistance to centralization due to increased information sharing on the internet."

"That's why information control must be a top priority in the years ahead, much more than in the past."

"It's not the information that one must worry about, Frank. It's the unpredictability of the human race."

Frank shook his head in disgust, "Look, not everything can be accounted for, that's true. But you must realize, the positives far outweigh the negatives. It's a calculated risk."

James gazed out his window thoughtfully. Could something of this magnitude really be pulled off and not have it come back to haunt the planners and perpetrators? Was it worth the risk? He turned back to Frank slowly and asked, "So if one were to make such a scenario come to pass, where would one begin?"

Frank grinned ear to ear. He could feel the adrenaline of the mother of all black ops flowing through his pores. It would be something the likes of which the world had never seen. It would be

profitable. It would be earth-shaking. It would be the exciting magnum opus and grand finale of a storied spook's career.

"Well," Frank began, "I suppose, one might need to start fund raising. Even if the op falls through, the funds could be used elsewhere."

Crown grinned and gnawed at a pen, "True. Money is always a good place to start. Investment capital must be a priority."

"Groundwork would have to be laid," Frank added.

"Don't be so vague, Frank."

"I mean politically and logistically," Frank clarified.

James went on, "Those on a need to know basis, I imagine. One wouldn't want to have too large a circle involved in such an endeavor."

Frank chuckled, "That goes without saying."

James said, "And control files would be necessary as insurance, to keep those involved honest."

Frank thought this to also be amusing and said, "You have a great ability to phrase things in just the right way. Yes, I imagine that control files would be necessary. They usually are."

James laughed and said, "I also imagine that time is of the essence, and one might have no time to waste."

Frank got frank, "These things take time."

James recoiled, "No need to get testy. I'm well aware that patience is sometimes necessary. However, these are urgent matters to be dealt with."

"I'm well aware of the urgency. Time is money, but I say again, these things take time."

"Very well, Frank. I suppose one might lay some groundwork immediately, then?"

"Yes," Frank confirmed.

"In the meantime," James added, "steps will be taken to ensure that defense spending increases, whether overtly or covertly. Some changes in DC must occur. I'll have a chat with Bob and get some things going on the financial side, and you get the ball rolling on ops."

"Very well," Frank agreed. James Crown and Frank Carlucci shook hands and smiled. It was time to make some serious moves.

Chapter 11

NATO Operations Complex
Bosnia

The color and aesthetics of the giant warehouse processing center were about as inviting as a kick in the face. It was about as dreary, mechanical, and soulless as a place can get. In other words, it was critical infrastructure for dark operations.

Professor Rogue was busy dividing up the spoils of war. The latest haul of hundreds of refugees represented his professional playground. He got the pick of the litter. The fates of war refugees could go in multiple directions. There was the highly lucrative organ harvesting, or the experimental psycho-chemical human trials that always needed fresh meat, or there was the oldest profession on earth, prostitution. The distinguished-looking, white coated Rogue determined which path each unwilling subject would take.

A mass of human misery was sprawled out across the cavernous warehouse. Young, old, slim, fat, men, women, and children. It ran the gamut. All were in the same hellhole. They had survived the war in their home country but were sentenced to something worse than death. They were to be guinea pigs in the dark sacrifices on the altar of science.

Professor Rogue held perfect posture in his high-back leather chair as he scanned the prisoner list in his powder-white hands. He was thinking to himself that it was a banner crop and was nearing relief as his work was almost done. He had done psychological and physiological evaluations on nearly 300 disappeared individuals. Science needed to conduct human trials to test the efficacy of a myriad of drugs and procedures and it was Professor Rogue's job to deliver the right specimens to the right companies and agencies.

And he was paid handsomely for it. It took a special kind of psychological makeup to do Professor Rogue's job. The fact was, though, he relished it. It was his left-brain, mechanical nature that controlled his actions and eradicated human empathy completely. He was a perfect cog in a heartless machine.

The door to the grim office came open swiftly and a man in dark military fatigues asked, "Professor, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I've been told by my superiors that we're getting pressed for time. Can you give an estimate of when you'll complete the evaluations?"

The lean man of science turned slowly in his chair to face the unwanted intruder and said dryly, "Science cannot be rushed, therefore, I will not be rushed. Is that clear?"

The soldier put his head down meekly and replied, "Yes, sir, but"

The professor cut him off, "There are no buts. When the specimens have been properly evaluated, then you will be informed. Now please, send in the next specimen, 297F, and do not disturb me again."

"Yes, sir."

Rogue stared at the entrance expectantly and awaited the next subject. A tender young female, no more than fourteen years of age, meekly stumbled in. Her sleek almond eyes gave uncertain looks of lost innocence towards her captor. Rogue admired her long, lustrous chestnut hair and her smooth, slender frame. "Please, have a seat my dear."

The frightened teen stood before him and didn't budge. She trembled from fear and sleep deprivation. Rogue persisted, "What's your name, my dear?"

No verbal response. Her almond eyes trembled. Rogue stood up and began circling his prey as he eyed her up and down. "Not very chatty, today, are we? My name is Professor Rogue. If you'll tell me your name, we can get you out of here, to a better place. Can you do that for me, dear?"

Still nothing. He stopped circling and looked her sharply in the eyes, "Do you not know your name?"

She shook a meek no and squirmed awkwardly. Rogue grabbed her by the head and started feeling around vigorously. “Ah ha, I see. This wasn’t in my report. You suffered quite a knock on the head. Perhaps you have amnesia. Well, my dear, let’s get a name for you, shall we?”

He paused to ponder the options. Never short of a twisted sense of humor, the white-coat thought of the girl’s parents. According to the records at Rogue’s disposal, both had disappeared during the war and the girl had been orphaned. Both of her parents were Missing In Action. “I believe we’ll call you Mia. How does that grab you?”

Her lip slightly curled and her eyes became easy for a passing moment. “I’ll take that as a yes. Now, my dear Mia, what are we to do with you? You are a very lovely little thing, aren’t you?”

She blinked and held false hope that this man could actually save her from the hell she’d endured during the war. Rogue began circling again, “Yes, you’re much too lovely to endure any experimental procedures. We save that fate for other, more brutish and less agreeable types. I believe the best purpose you could serve would be to make merry some lucky gent. You like to make people happy, don’t you?”

She quivered and took a step back. “Or perhaps many,” Rogue quipped to himself. “Very well, Mia, you may go now. Don’t worry, you’ll be leaving this place very soon.” She didn’t budge. He motioned to the exit. “Go Mia, I’m a very busy man.” She gave a quizzical look. “Go!” he bellowed. She slowly turned and walked away. If she had known where she was going, she might have run.

Chapter 12

The Lolita Express was flying high. Music pulsed in the sky. Champagne flowed and blow rocketed up plastic noses. This was Jeff Epstein's flying palace of shame. But he was a billionaire. He was untouchable.

Jeff was on sensory overload. He hadn't slept in well over 24 hours. Narcotics continued to fuel the pedo fire that raged in his core.

A couple of doped-up teenage girls were passed out naked on the floor. Needle tracks littered their arms. They had already had their turn with the men more than twice their age. They had taken the punishment with a numbed acquiescence. Now they could have a few moments of drug induced slumber. It was the only poor excuse for peace they could find in this evil world they had been born into.

How did they end up here? A country is torn by ethnic strife. Powers the young girls will never understand exacerbate the situation. War breaks out. Hell breaks loose. One thing leads to another. The UN and NATO "peace keepers" move in and take over. Defense contractors come in to reap the rewards. The young and the beautiful get scooped up, drugged up, sold off, and fucked til they die. The broken and butt ugly are sold off to be human guinea pigs for a colorful array of new pharmaceuticals. The TV told the world that the war was over and that peace keepers reigned in Bosnia.

Not for these girls. The war had ended but their hell continued in a different form. Now they weren't dodging bombs but taking various missile shaped objects into their body against their will. They were the unseen and unheard spoils of war.

And billionaire pedophiles were their new masters.

Epstein's eyes raged with pleasure. His thrusts continued violently and sweat poured from his pores. His latest victim was pinned helplessly against the wall. She had her sunken almond eyes closed and offered no resistance. Her mind was blank from the drugs. She couldn't cry if she wanted to. Her heart was weak. She was about as lifeless as a person with a pulse can be.

The freak that was invading her didn't care. His inhuman and deviant nature wouldn't allow it. He loved young girls. He couldn't get enough. He didn't know her name. He never knew the names of his victims.

Epstein's thin face and glazed eyes took a peek across the luxury jumbo jet and saw a blurry picture. Jeff wondered who it was for a vague moment. The mind that had helped him to make billions was fading to black. Then it came to him. Oh yeah, that's Peter Soros. His partner in lustful crimes. A fellow financial agent of chaos.

Jeff threw the girl down. The teenage girl he was screwing fell limp to the floor. The last thing he saw before passing out was a tattoo on her back which read "MIA". Peter kept on fucking. The pilot didn't look back and didn't ask any questions. The Lolita Express raged on.

Chapter 13

Rural Virginia
March 10, 1996

“Frank, you know I’m always happy to help out,” Dov said as he wrinkled his nose nervously.

Frank chuckled as he gave his smooth wheels some gas and said, “You’re lying. You help because of your own self interest and I make you nervous. What can I do to ease those sensitive nerves of yours, Dovey?”

Dr. Z took offense. Scared of Frank Carlucci? Never. Scared of The Company? Absolutely.

Dov Zakheim had received another cryptic message from his stealthy companion a week earlier. The note read “NEED LEVERAGE ON A COUPLE OF INVESTORS.....F”

Investors for what? Why the sudden surge in need for dirt? The slick Company man was up to something.

Dov said with a raised voice, “You could tell me what the fuck is going on, Frank. Why the hell am I digging up all this dirt for you?”

Frank didn’t flinch. He just grinned his typically overzealous grin. “Why, Dovey, do you want in?”

Dr. Z’s initial reaction was a resounding NO inside his head. He didn’t have quite the appetite for risking his neck like some other men that ran in Carlucci’s circles. His secondary thought was an emphatic YES. His curiosity was bubbling over. He also knew that whatever the project was, that it would be immensely profitable. Men like Frank Carlucci didn’t lose money, one way or another.

“No,” came the answer.

“Stop lying to me,” Frank said curtly as he took a tight curve with the black Mercedes.

Dov said with an offended tone, “I wouldn’t lie to you, Frank.”

“I’ll tell you when the time is right. It’s too early. You did good, Dovey. You’re gonna go places. For right now, I suggest you relax. Go home. Drink some booze. Fuck someone or something to take the edge off. You’re too god damned tense.”

Dov rolled his eyes. He knew he was already part of an op. He just hoped he wasn’t going to be a fall guy. He had no desire to be a famous patsy. Damn compartmentalization.

Chapter 14

Ankara Turkey
March 22, 1996

The little hole-in-the-wall Turkish tea house was buzzing with chatter. It was loud, off the beaten path, and had some of the best tea in town. It was perfect for clandestine banter.

Major Dickerson had grown to love Turkey. There was something mystical and magical about it. His job wasn't easy, so he at least took solace in the fact that Ankara was an agreeable place to do business. The call from the CIA man had come at just the right time as far as the major was concerned. There were some problems bubbling up from the depths of his operation. He thought that the Company man was coming to help.

Graham Fuller was one of the CIA's top Middle East experts. He had been instructed on some new moves that needed to be made now that the Bosnia situation was under control.

Mr. Fuller rubbed his white beard methodically and eyed the major with an earnest intensity. "Major, you've done a helluva job. The Bosnia operation had it's bumps along the way, but overall, was a job well done."

The Major took those kind words with a boulder of salt. He knew the Company didn't send people on errands to pat people on the back. Something else was going on.

"Ok, can we get past the bullshit, Graham. We both know you're not here to suck my dick, so go ahead and get on with it," Dickerson said gruffly as he sipped his bittersweet beverage.

Fuller's face dropped. Can't even compliment a soldier of fortune on a job well done. Fine then. Cut to it.

Before Graham could speak, the major continued, "And by the way, what's going on in Bosnia right now is too damn sloppy. Those DynCorp guys are way too over the top. They're gonna get busted one of these days, just you watch."

Dyncorp was one of the defense contractors responsible for stability and logistics operations after wars were "officially" ended. They worked with NATO, the UN, and the military to divide up the loot and restructure the country. Bosnia was the most recent operation which required their so-called expertise.

Fuller got serious real quick and sputtered vehemently, "That's not your business. They're not part of your operation."

"The hell they aren't!" Dickerson spewed angrily. "One thing leads to another, and before you know it, the wrong people look in the wrong places and ops get fucked."

"We're not here to talk about what's happening right now in Bosnia, major, now get yourself in line. Our Muslim men did their job and the war is over, and now it's time to move on. That's what we're here to discuss and I suggest you listen if you know what's good for you."

Dickerson looked away bitterly for a moment. He knew his hands were tied. The man across from him was his superior.

"Now," Fuller continued, catching his breath. "There's a new op in the works. First of all, we're making a transition away from Mr. Catli."

Dickerson breathed a sigh of relief. That was the first good news he'd gotten in a while. Catli was a focal point of heroin production and distribution in Turkey. He'd been getting a little uppity lately and had made some waves with various factions within Turkish military and political circles. He had become more trouble than he was worth. Now here was a Company man telling the major that Catli was on the way out. This would make life easier.

"Of course," Fuller continued as he tugged at his fedora. "This means that he'll need to be silenced, for security purposes." This meant murdered.

The major shrugged his muscular shoulders. "So who's next in line?"

“Some old friends of the Company,” Fuller explained, “The Baybasin brothers. Arrangements are already being made for them to fill the void. Not only that, but we need to facilitate a larger operation. Things are going into high gear and we need more financing. You will be told when and where to liaison with them. At the current moment, one of your chief concerns is to make sure that Mr. Catli is well taken care of. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” said the major as he polished off his tea.

Fuller smiled. He had the major’s undivided attention. “The next order of business is, now that our men are finished in Bosnia, we need to find them some new work. It’s different this time, though. We need some pilots.”

Dickerson laughed heartily. He’d been dealing with Middle Eastern mercenaries for quite some time. Pilots? They most certainly were not.

“Those guys aren’t fucking pilots,” the major said candidly.

“They will be, at least some of them,” Fuller explained.

The Major asked, “How many?”

“Four.”

“Four?”

“Did I stutter?”

“Fuck you, Graham.”

Fuller continued, “You are to coordinate with Mr. Atta and Mr. Zawahiri. Mr. Atta and some of his associates will be waiting for you in Hamburg.”

“Hamburg?”

Fuller was getting annoyed. “Stop repeating so much. Yes, fucking Hamburg.”

The Major was getting confused. Damn compartmentalization. “Getting back to Catli. If he’s out, then what about the money?”

Fuller chuckled and crossed his arms, “The money will be going elsewhere, which is not your concern at this time. You’ll be given more information later.”

Fuller didn’t know where all that dope money would be going later, either. All he knew was that something big was in the works and he had to scramble to get things done for the higher ups.

Chapter 15

Washington DC

April 1996

“Good evening, Bob,” said the muscular stranger. Bob Livingston grabbed his chest and shook so hard his glasses fell from his thin face.

The stranger hopped up from Bob’s dark brown leather sofa and offered, “Here, let me get those for you, Bob.” The steely stranger slung himself into a crouching position in one swift motion and retrieved the fallen spectacles.

Upon grabbing the spectacles from the intruder, Bob asked, “Who the fuck are you, and what are you doing in my house?”

The black ops vet standing in his living room answered smugly, “You have a lovely home, Bob. I’m here to help you keep it that way.”

The uninvited guest spotted a crystal bottle of booze sitting on a mahogany table across the room and requested firmly, “Hey Bob, is that scotch? Are you a scotch man?” Bob nodded.

“Let’s have a drink, Bob, do you mind?”

Bob shook his head no.

The stranger poured a couple of generous drinks and handed one to his shocked host. The muscular intruder asked, “What should we toast to?”

Congressman Bob Livingston just stared at his sculpted captor. What could he do? He was home alone and the guy standing next to him could break his neck faster than you can spell corruption.

The uninvited guest smiled confidently and said, “We’ll drink to world peace. That’s a good one, right Bob?”

Bob stood motionless and expressionless. The stranger burst into uncontrolled fits of laughter. It took a certain psychological profile to do what this agent of chaos did, and he was lapping up every minute of his encounter with Congressman Livingston. They did an uneasy clink of glasses and took a healthy swig.

“Mmmm, that’s good stuff. You have impeccable taste in scotch, Bob. Anyway, I suppose you’re wondering what this is all about. The first thing I’ll tell you is that you need to relax. I’m not going to kill you.” He paused. “Or torture you, for that matter.”

Bob gulped.

The fleet footed guest zipped across the room and grabbed a large envelope off of the coffee table. He pulled out a couple of photos and a disc. He held one of the photos up prominently so his host could have a good look.

Livingston turned powder white. The stranger started cackling again. “You should see the look on your face, holy shit! You’ve never seen a picture of yourself having sex before, Bob? She looks very tasteful, someone your wife could grow to love.”

Bob’s heart rate doubled. He got chills and cold sweats. He wanted to die. The cackling intruder flung the disc at Bob’s chest and hit a bullseye.

“If you like the still shots, Bob, then you’ll love the quality of that video. I know I did.”

More outrageous fits of demonic chuckles.

Mr. Livingston started hyperventilating and babbling incoherently, “How did you....Who.....What the fuck?”

The stranger swaggered over to Bob and put his arm around him. “Now don’t you worry, Congressman Bob Livingston. Everything is gonna be just fine. All you have to do is follow the rules and this will stay our little secret, ok?”

Bob gulped again and finished his whiskey. “I’ll do anything, please. Just tell me what I have to do. Please.”

The stranger smiled gleefully and tugged the frail Livingston closer to him, nearly in a headlock. "Don't you worry, Bob, I know. That's why I'm here." He handed Bob the envelope, "Go ahead, open it. Take a look."

Bob grabbed the envelope slowly and rustled out one of the pages inside. He glanced over it briefly. It was a list of rosy sounding yet vague organizations. Confused, Bob asked, "What is all this? Benevolence International, Alliance For Shared Values, Friends of Azerbaijan, Center For Democratic Progress? What the hell? I don't get it."

The cat-like stranger grinned, "Those are all organizations which need help from the American people. You're a friend of the American people, I know that for sure, Bob. I also know that you're the Chair of the House Appropriations Committee. And that, right there, in your hand, is a list of organizations that will receive very generous aid packages from your little committee. Do we have an understanding, Bob Livingston?"

He stared at Bob coldly with a stiff jaw. Bob's mouth was gaping open. He took a deep breath and said, "Look, just because I'm the chair doesn't mean that I control"

The stranger cut him off loudly, "Find a way! We trust you, Bob, and trust me, you'll be greatly rewarded for your efforts."

"We?" crossed Livingston's mind. Who the fuck was "we"?

"Do we have an understanding?"

Congressman Bob Livingston pursed his lips out thoughtfully and nodded slowly. "Yes," he relented, "we have an understanding."

The stranger patted Livingston on the back, "That's great Bob. I'll show myself out. Don't worry, we'll be in touch."

2 days later

The Hamptons

Epstein took a tipsy step into his mansion. His red face turned a shade brighter when he saw some unexpected house guests waiting for him in his designer leather chairs. Shock turned to confusion as he recognized the two unannounced companions.

With a boozy giggle Jeff slurred, "Hey, George, hey Peter. How the hell did you get in here?" Before they could answer, he spotted a big fat shiny black eye protruding in epic fashion from the face of Peter Soros. "What the fuck happened to you, Pete?"

George Soros threw a disc at Epstein with his old, fat, crusty fingers and popped him in the chest. George raged as his fierce eyes blazed. "What the fuck did you do to my nephew, you arrogant prick?"

Jeff didn't know what to say. Was this old man for real? He shook his head in disbelief as he took a seat across from the pair. "George, I don't get it. You wanna fill me in here, somebody? Pete, what happened to your eye? And you still didn't tell me how the fuck you got in here, or why, for that matter."

"We got an unwanted visitor who brought us here," George answered with indignation. "He gave us this disc and some instructions, some very costly instructions, I might add."

Peter continued with his speechless sobbing. George continued his angry demon look. Jeff's buzz was starting to wear off.

"What visitor?" Jeff asked as he narrowed his boozy eyes. "Is there someone else here?"

"No," Peter said meekly. "He let us in here and disappeared."

"His instructions were very detailed," George said.

Jeff held his hand up and spoke nervously, "Now, wait a minute, what's on that disc you just assaulted me with?"

George started to growl. Peter held out a prohibitive hand of mercy. George stopped growling and said, "There's video on there of you two engaged in acts which most in this world would consider to be lewd, at best. Criminal, at worst."

Jeff looked confused. The booze kept him from connecting the dots quickly. George shouted, "We're being blackmailed, you sick fuck. You two clowns are going to cost us a fortune. And why? So you can get your rocks off with some shot-out little girls from god knows where."

Jeff clutched his chest. His mind was racing and he started to sweat. How could this be? It was a private plane! Who the hell had access? This was impossible! He took a deep breath and said, "Ok, lemme get this straight. Some guy kidnaps you, gives you a video disc of one of my private parties, then ditches you here and gives you payoff instructions?"

Peter nodded slowly as he dabbed his eye with a cold cloth. Jeff continued, "So how much, who do we have to pay, and when?"

George looked at him coldly and replied, "Unspecified amounts to a list of accounts over an unspecified length of time. They'll give us details later."

A wave of incredulity washed over Jeff from gray hair to designer shoes. "So we're being blackmailed perpetually."

Another sad affirmation from Peter. George handed a crispy page to lobster-faced Jeff. He scanned it quickly and gave the elder Soros a quizzical look. "All of these organizations? What the hell is Benevolence International? And all of them have accounts in Cyprus?"

A cold slice of silence gave the answer. George broke the silence with a grizzly huff and said, "We were told to await further instructions. He said he'll be in touch."

Chapter 16

Hamburg Germany
June 1996

The young Egyptian with the dark hawkish eyes took a cold sip of his Hefeweizen. Mohamed Atta had grown to like some of the German customs in his years of study in Hamburg. He stiffened his jaw and asked his counterpart, “What the hell are the Americans up to? What do you mean, fly?”

The man across the table was Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of the top recruiters and organizers in the Middle Eastern covert network maintained by the intelligence community. He’d been working with the CIA since the 80s in Afghanistan as part of the Mujahideen. He’d learned to not ask too many questions and thought it would be prudent to instruct his young partner to do the same.

With calm eyes the gray bearded man encouraged the young student across from him, “Look, Mohamed, it is in your interest, your family’s interest, and in my interest to not ask too many questions. All I know is that now that the job is finished in Bosnia, we are being instructed to move on. Part of that process is, you will learn to fly.”

Mohamed looked skeptical. He wasn’t a pilot. He wasn’t even a fighter. He was a man with technical skills. He also had the wonderful gift of influence thanks to his spirited voice and stern, confident face. Up to now, he’d only been a preacher and a recruiter. He’d find gullible, desperate young men and convince them to sacrifice their lives in the obscure name of Allah. But now he felt he was being led into a trap. But what could he do? You can’t just walk away from the Company and not have consequences.

Zawahiri continued as he sipped from a frosty beer mug, “Mohamed, I don’t know why they need pilots. What I do know, is that a great deal of money is being poured into Muslim institutions, like I’ve never seen before. This opportunity is greater than you. It’s greater than me.”

Mohamed looked away for a moment and pondered his options. He then came back and pierced his counterpart with blazing eyes and said, “And if I don’t?”

“It’s all or nothing, you know that.”

“And what will you be doing, old man?”

“I’ll be opening new mosques in the US and recruiting from there. As I said, the money is pouring in and we have much work to do.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange that, all of a sudden, there is this surge in funding? What’s their endgame here?”

“It’s always good to be cautious, but not paranoid. You’re a smart young man, Mr. Atta. I trust you will do what is best for you and your family. I’ll be going to America before the end of the year. Until that time, I’ll be working with our American friends in various centers around the Middle East, Europe, and Russia. While I’m away from Hamburg, you’ll take on greater responsibilities here.”

Mohamed knew he was in too deep. There was no backing out now. Whatever his handlers were up to, he hoped it didn’t involve him actually practicing what he was preaching.

London England
June 1996

Carlucci observed with amusement, “Bob, you look pleased. I have a feeling that means that I will soon be pleased as well.” He was right. The normally stoic master of global finance had an unusually glowing complexion about him.

His lips curled up and his eyes beamed. “More like relieved, and tired, actually. I’ve been through a whirlwind of meetings the past few months.”

“Tired?” Carlucci responded, genuinely surprised. “You look upbeat.”

Druskin twirled his finger around inside his rocks whiskey glass. “That I am. That’s why I wanted to meet you. We have lots to discuss.”

“Indeed we do,” Frank agreed as he eased back in his throne-like leather lounge chair.

Mr. Druskin dryly requested, “Before I let you in on what I’ve got in the works, I’d like an update on your end,”

“Well,” began Frank, “So far, things are going quite well. However, on a limited basis. Arrangements are being made both financially as well as operationally in the Middle East. As far as preparations here in the US, I haven’t made many moves yet.”

Bob gave a concerned look and asked why.

“Bob, these things take time. Right now the circle is very small. We’re just beginning. As we get nearer to actual execution, more people will be brought in as needed. It’s going to require a change of administration here in the US. We need someone more pliable.”

“Agreed,” the banker said emphatically. “Bill’s done well in some areas, like free trade, but overall, he hasn’t budged in some key areas,” Bob said in a heavy tone.

“Exactly,” Frank concurred. “So we’re going to get someone in the white house four years from now, an ace in the whole. We’re going to need lots of players in the next administration to pull off an operation this big.”

Druskin suggested, “Which is why you haven’t done much stateside yet,”

“Bullseye. But I promise, when the time is right, we will. As for now, most of our efforts have been getting recruits and financing in the Middle East. After the big day, we’re going to need a long and protracted enemy, so lots of resources need to be used over the coming years to grow and maintain that enemy.”

“An enemy we control,” Druskin agreed.

“As with any mercenaries, control is never absolute, but the short answer is yes,” Frank explained.

There was a dark silence before Frank asked, “And on your end? You’ve been a busy man, so I imagine you have lots to cover.”

“Indeed,” Druskin said contentedly. “I’ve been making some arrangements that will be beneficial to us in the short term. I had a meeting with Mr. Rubin and Mr. Greenspan. The Pentagon will be receiving significant funding, shall we say, off the books.”

“Very interesting,” Frank said eagerly as he hunched forward.

“I haven’t told you the interesting part, yet,” Bob continued proudly. “In order to have plausible deniability, the money will be distributed via Special Access Programs to a number of front companies in Cyprus. However, that’s only the start of it. We need to change the rules of the game for the next part to work.”

“What rules?” Frank asked, mesmerized by the deceptive genius before him.

“We need to have the boys in Washington repeal the Glass-Steagall Act,” Bob said.

“Why is that?” Frank asked, perplexed.

Bob continued, “Because Glass-Steagall has been a thorn in the side of the banking industry for decades, and now, with the advent of algorithm driven trading, it is imperative that it is repealed. Glass-Steagall, as you know, Frank, kept commercial and investment banking separate. We need it united if our plan is going to work.”

“How so?”

“It’s really very simple. All that money that goes from the Pentagon to our offshore shells will be held until Glass-Steagall is repealed. After that, we can go full force into the derivatives market. It will generate enormous short term profits. Of course, once defense spending skyrockets again, which it will, if your little operation is successful, then we can slowly divest ourselves from that market and walk away with unheard of profits.”

Frank was truly impressed. It was a work of genius. However, the sheer numbers and the paper trail it would leave made Frank a little apprehensive.

"That's great, Bob. Absolutely fucking genius. I must admit, though, I'm a little concerned about the paper trail."

The clever old financial con man smiled widely and leaned back. He wasn't the least bit worried. He was sure Frank could destroy that paper trail.

"Frank, that's where you come in. There will be no paper trail. Part of your operation will be to destroy the beginning of the trail."

Frank's eyes narrowed. "You're asking for a one in a million hit on a target."

Mr. Druskin smiled confidently and reassured his business partner. "We have the utmost confidence in you. We're sure you can find a way to make that paper disappear."

Frank took a deep breath. It was a tall order. A plane had to hit the Pentagon exactly in the accounting department. That better be one hell of a pilot.

Ankara Turkey
July 1996

"We've got a problem," Major Dickerson said hurriedly as he wiped sweat from his brow. Graham Fuller knew there was a problem the moment The Major had contacted him.

"Explain," Fuller ordered.

"Zawahiri's in Russia."

Fuller's face started to flush dark red which punctuated his snow white beard. "Continue," he said angrily.

"The FSB got him. He's being held and, it would be prudent to assume, interrogated."

"Why the fuck is he in Russia?" Fuller asked, growing exponentially more incredulous.

"I sent him there," the nervous Major relented.

"Why the fuck did you send him to Russia?"

"He's doing some recruiting there, for the operation in Chechnya."

"Did I authorize that?"

"No."

"Who the fuck did?"

"I did."

"Your job, Major, is to follow orders. You are not a planner or a decision maker. You don't authorize shit unless someone craps it through your mouth for you, do you understand? And now that you've stepped out of line, a critical asset is in the hands of Russian Intelligence, for fucks sake!"

"I thought that," the Major began before he was interrupted.

"No! Your job is not to think. Did you just hear a god damn word I said?"

The Major's face flushed, "I'll get him out."

"The hell you will! You think I'm gonna give you another chance to fuck this up? I'll get his ass out, and you'll await further instruction. You're lucky you have friends in the council that think so highly of you, god knows why. But if you manage to screw this operation up, I imagine your friends might shorten up their fuses a bit. You stay here in Ankara and don't do a fucking thing."

"Yes, sir."

2 weeks later
Washington DC

George Tenet wasn't angry. He was curious. The Deputy Director of Central Intelligence was extremely interested to know why one of the top Al-Qaeda operatives in the world had been

captured by the Russians and then escaped with such ease. His position in the clandestine world gave him a great deal of arrogance. He expected to know why such things were happening, at the very least. But this was off his radar and he intended to figure it out. Not being in the know made him nervous.

After poring over various bits of intel concerning the Middle East, Tenet had deduced who he might need to question directly. The movements of Graham Fuller seemed to be of interest, so he had arranged a meeting.

“Graham, good to see you,” the affable-looking director said as he offered his hand to Mr. Fuller.

Fuller smiled cordially and shook Mr. Tenet’s hand. “Always a pleasure to come to Washington.”

Mr. Tenet smirked and ran a hand through his thick salt and pepper hair, “Look, I know that you’re not officially a Company man anymore, but I was hoping you could help shed some light on an interesting occurrence from a couple of weeks ago.”

Fuller kept a straight face and said calmly, “I’ll be more than happy to assist in any way that I can.”

Tenet smiled and leaned closer to his counterpart, “That’s great to hear, Graham. The event I’m referring to is the capture of Ayman al-Zawahiri by the Russians and his subsequent release. A classified report I have places you and some of your known associates in Russia conveniently at around the same time of his release. I was wondering if you could expound on that odd coincidence.”

Graham smiled and leaned in closer, whispering, “Mr. Tenet, with all due respect, I’m afraid I can’t help you at the moment.”

Tenet took a deep breath and leaned back. He stared at the man across from him and tried to size him up. Should he press him or not?

Fuller continued, “I emphasize the words, ‘at the moment.’ Mr. Tenet, I’m sure that when the time is right, we’ll be able to shed some light on this unfortunate incident for you. However, it would be a prudent move on your part, and in your own self interest, to wait it out.”

Tenet didn’t know who Fuller was working with. What he did know was that it must be people in very high positions. He also knew that there was not much he could do to drag information from a Company veteran like Fuller. His hands were tied. He decided to wait.

Chapter 17

Ankara Turkey
November 4, 1996

“All hell is going to break loose!” yelled a red-faced Fuller. He was pacing back and forth, stomping around like a madman. “What the hell were you thinking, Major?”

The Major’s heart was racing. He knew his time in Turkey was limited, at the very least. At worst, he might get demoted to the depths of intel hell. “You gave me targets to take out, so I took them out.”

“In public view! It’s all over the press!”

The day before, Abdullah Catli, a notorious Turkish gangster and drug trafficker who had worked closely with the CIA on covert ops, was killed in a car crash. The jet-black Mercedes had crashed at over 80mph, killing all occupants except one. Catli, his girlfriend, and a senior Turkish police official had died. A member of the Turkish parliament had survived. The fact that there was a survivor was bad enough, but the worst part was how the job was finished. The crash hadn’t killed anyone immediately.

Fuller fumed, “You sent a guy to snap their fucking necks! During rush hour! Do you know how many witnesses there are? This is a PR nightmare! The press is sticking their collective nose in and wondering why such a motley group was together in the first place!”

The Major hung his head and answered in a low tone, “It wasn’t supposed to go down like that. After the crash, a remote detonation was supposed to go off, but it malfunctioned. In order to assure Catli and the cop didn’t live, the fail safe was to snap necks, but it was never supposed to come to that.”

Fuller stared up towards the heavens and held his hands on his hips. “You’re done, and so are a bunch of other Americans here in Turkey. All thanks to your carelessness.” He paused, collected himself, and turned a dark eye towards the Major. “You and your wife will go back to Washington.”

“Who should I report to?”

“You report to no one. You do nothing until we find something useful for you to do, something that’s a lot harder to fuck up. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“In the meantime, I’ve got to clean up your mess here in Turkey.”

Turkish Embassy
Baku Azerbaijan
January 1997

“Pleasure to see you again, Ambassador Grossman,” The Major said tongue in cheek. Major Dick was rough around the edges, and had a knack for misplaced sarcasm at just the wrong moments.

“I’m not here in an official capacity, Major, so no need for titles,” Grossman explained dryly.

Marc Grossman, the American ambassador to Turkey, was not in the mood for jokes. He had just spent the past two months helping to quell the conspiratorial fires that raged in the public eye. Turkey was a key ally, and the major fuck up of eliminating prominent, yet unscrupulous partners in such a public display had wrecked havoc on Grossman’s situation. He had been informed that new alliances were being constructed with other key players in the Middle East, but he didn’t know why. All he knew was that Major Dickerson had made his life a living hell for the past two months, thus, he was nowhere near a jovial mood.

Grossman shot back, "So you're an errand boy now, Major? How does that feel?"

The Major smirked, "I guess that makes two of us."

That had been the beginning of their dialogue the night before. They had discussed their orders on how to move forward. Abdullah Catli, longtime heroin kingpin and partner of the Company, had been eliminated. He had outlived his usefulness. The kingmakers were now ready to appoint a new, more pliable, poppy prince. Conditions had to be set. Agreements had to be reached. Arms had to be twisted. The recruiting and training of the ambitious and malicious of the Middle East was going into high gear for future conflicts, which was a costly endeavor, and not one that the US Congress would openly assent to.

Now the muscle and the diplomat were rounding the corner to their private conference room in the Turkish Embassy in Azerbaijan. The meeting couldn't be held in Turkey because things were still hot from the Catli scandal. Not only that, but Azerbaijan was one of the few countries in the world which, by law, could not be monitored by the FBI. It was one of the safer places to have a sensitive conversation.

They entered the conference room and were greeted by their counterparts. Zawahiri and Prince Bandar rose to greet their business partners. The new heroin king, Huseyin Baybasin, did not. He had good reason not to. He was confined to a wheel chair. He'd been shot due to a turf war and suffered irreparable nerve damage years earlier. He'd been a mid-level trafficker for some time with his brother Abdullah. No one had received the news of Catli's death better than the Baybasin brothers.

"Please, have a seat," Grossman ordered. "Mr. Baybasin, I'll get straight to the first order of business. I understand that the untimely death of Mr. Catli has opened up great business opportunities for you."

Baybasin raised a sharp brow and his middle aged and drug war weary face looked amused. Grossman continued, "Those I represent would like to discuss some business, as it appears we have some common interests."

The drug lord smiled slowly and sardonically and asked, "Common interests?"

Grossman speared the cripple with sharp eyes and answered, "Money." Baybasin raised his hand in a welcoming manner, "Please continue."

The Ambassador twisted Baybasin's arm further, "As you know, your business is frowned upon by the law. However, at times, it becomes necessary to bend certain laws in order to achieve objectives."

The Major smiled at the lifer diplomat's creative language. That's why he was the brains and the Major was the muscle.

Grossman went on, "In exchange for protection, all we ask is that you direct a fair share of your profits in the direction of our choosing."

Baybasin laughed, "You have a wonderful way with words. I'd love to know what you consider a fair share."

"You can keep ten percent of the cash," Grossman stated gruffly. This really got a guffaw out of the smack kingpin.

"Ten percent? Why don't you just tell me you're going to cut my balls off? That would be less insulting."

Grossman looked amused and glanced at The Major. "If you don't take our offer, you will be thrown in prison and, quite possibly, you will lose your balls, so watch your fucking mouth. You need us more than we need you. Don't ever forget that." Everyone looked on as Baybasin turned snow white. He wasn't accustomed to being ripped like that. The worst part was that he knew it was the truth.

Grossman broke the silence, "You didn't let me finish. Another ten percent will be invested for you and you will receive the dividends."

Baybasin pondered the proposition. Would his brother go for it? “You seem so confident that an investment can’t lose. How can you be so sure?”

Grossman and The Major had a chuckle at this naive and misdirected fear. Grossman explained, “My associates are not in the habit of losing. As long as you do your job and don’t do anything stupid, then you can enjoy the benefits of our generous offer.”

He paused to let the words sink in, then continued, “Another ten percent will be donated.”

“Donated?” Baybasin asked with astonishment. This had to be a first at an underworld negotiation.

“Yes, Mr. Zawahiri and Prince Bandar will be supporting various charities with the proceeds your organization donates to our cause.”

What was our cause? And what about the other seventy percent? He couldn’t help but ask that tantalizing question.

Grossman scoffed, “I’m sure you’re a good Muslim, are you not, Mr. Baybasin? Many Muslim charities, such as the Benevolence International Foundation, will receive ample generosity from your exploits.”

Grossman gave a sinister look of contentment and added, “The remaining funds are not your business. You will ask no questions. Do we have an agreement?”

Baybasin nodded and extended his hand to seal the deal. Grossman went on as he motioned towards The Major, “This is The Major. He will be in touch with you in the future. You will receive further details of how your operation will be conducted in the near future. These three men will be your liaisons. You will never see or hear from me again.”

Grossman rose and the others quickly followed suit. The deal was sealed. The world of Turkish heroin was under new management, but the owners remained the same.

Chapter 18

Seehof Hotel
 Davos Switzerland
 February 1997

The stylish Panorama Restaurant was hosting a private party. This was a place on the picturesque Swiss slopes that had become a favorite of many power players over the years. It was renowned for its discretion, tirelessly proper staff, and elite wine selection.

James Crown was still tired from his long flight from Chicago. “Why the hell did you drag me all the way to Switzerland?” he muttered with a yawn.

Vince Marafino snickered and shot back as he methodically swirled his red wine, “It’s the best place to get good Italian wine.”

Louis Gerstner chuckled and added, “God forbid we meet in Chicago. It’s too damn cold this time of year.”

Chicago native Crown rolled his eyes. David Rubenstein stared at the warm glow of the fireplace and smiled ironically, “So let’s get down to business, Frank. Time is money. I know you didn’t invite us here for shits and grins.”

Carlucci laughed, “As always, Dave, your perceptions serve you well. Bob and I have a lot to discuss with you.” He motioned to Bob Druskin, the savvy banker across the dark mahogany table.

Bob smiled knowingly and deferred to Frank, “You’re so much more eloquent than I, Frank. I’ll let you have the floor.”

Frank nodded cordially and began, “I’ll start with a question. Have the proper people been contacted at BAE, Raytheon, and so forth?”

Marafino jumped in and replied, “Yeah, let’s just say that the people I spoke with are definitely not against such endeavors. I’m sure they’d be willing to contribute in any way they could.”

“Perfect,” Frank said happily. “Everyone needs to be on the same page for this to work. Now let’s talk about everyone’s favorite subject. Money.” He passed a sheet of paper to everyone with a list on it. “These are the organizations in Cyprus that will be handling the funds.”

The steely circle of businessmen looked over the list for a moment. Mr. Crown looked sharply at Frank and asked, “And the intermediary?”

“First Merchant Bank. They’re in Cyprus, Dubai, and the Caymans.”

Rubenstein quipped, “The financial triangle of love.”

Gerstner chided his associate, “How many glasses of wine have you had, ya lightweight?”

“What the hell is this?” Marafino asked as he eyed the list. “What the hell is Benevolence International Foundation?”

Carlucci lowered his voice and leaned on the table, “It’s a fucking front, just like everything else on that list. Do I have to spell out everything for you?”

Marafino twisted his face, still a little confused. Druskin said with a chuckle, “Good thing you’re sharp enough to make up for old Vinny here, Frank.” He paused for effect. “So what’s gonna happen with Billy?”

“He could die,” Crown smacked arrogantly.

Frank raised a suspicious brow and said, “Not necessary. Things of this nature take time. There’s no rush, especially now that cash flow has been taken care of through other methods.”

“We gotta at least put the screws on him to get rid of Glass-Steagall,” Druskin suggested dryly. “Any ideas on that Frank?”

Carlucci leaned back and thought for a moment. He already knew the answer but wanted to make a show of it. "Well, slick Willy has plenty of skeletons in his closet. Some of those could be put on public display."

Gerstner said with pleasure, "That'll get him squirming,"

"There's more than enough ammo in that department," Frank said.

Druskin asked, "And who comes after Billy?"

Crown took a generous sip of his Chianti and suggested, "It should be someone extremely pliable."

"And not too bright," Rubenstein added.

Carlucci laughed, "No president is that bright, first of all. Secondly, it needs to be someone with less personal ambition than Clinton. He's too damn cocky, which as you know, has created certain issues."

Marafino added, "Someone who's family could be helpful."

Carlucci pursed his lips out, "How about Bush junior?"

This brought raucous laughter from the group. George W. Bush? President of the United States? It was ludicrous. Perhaps just ludicrous enough to work to their advantage.

A long faced waiter dressed in a spotless tux appeared and began to approach the group. Carlucci waved him off as he continued to guffaw at the audacity of the idea.

"Arbusto!" yelled Crown.

"El busto!" Gerstner screamed.

Rubenstein, on the verge of tears, explained, "Look, I know that Bill hasn't been overly cooperative at times, but little dubya? Are you kidding me? If you can't make money with an oil company that's handed to you on a silver platter, then I can only imagine the carnage that would ensue if he'd have the reigns in DC."

Carlucci toned down his laughter, "Exactly."

"What exactly?" Rubenstein asked.

"Carnage," Frank said.

The suddenly confused men gave each other stunned looks around the table. Was he serious? Rubenstein added, "Look Frank, there's good carnage, and there's bad carnage. I know that little Georgie might be easy to influence, but he's also capable of royal fuck ups."

Frank continued, "That might be so, but look at his family. We can count on them to help the cause."

James Crown dropped his head and shook it slowly, "I can't believe you're serious."

Druskin chimed in, "Maybe Frank is right. As long as the advisors are completely on board, then Bush could be quite useful on the throne."

"Throne as in the shitter?" Gerstner quipped.

Frank huffed, "Fuck you, Louie. It could work."

Druskin nodded approval, "Ok, Frank. You talk to the old man and see about junior getting deeper into politics."

Gerstner stated sadly, "Do you know the kind of PR that an election like that would require?"

Carlucci shot Louie a cocky glance, "Nothing your boys couldn't handle at McKinsey I assume."

McKinsey and Company was a world renowned consulting firm. Some of its subsidiaries were involved in an array of advertising and social change campaigns.

Druskin raised his hand, "Ok, we're getting ahead of ourselves here. Let's get on to other, more immediate, concerns. Frank, I think it would be prudent for a think tank to be formed, one specifically tasked with looking into the future of the Middle East and of American defense concerns in particular. It will serve a dual purpose. On the overt side, it will appear as a group of scholarly individuals concerned with American defense policies. On the other hand, it will help

deflect any unwanted attention in the future if any unfortunate questions would be asked in the aftermath.”

Carlucci responded, “I’m way ahead of you, Bob. I’ve already got something in the works called Project For A New American Century.”

“That’s why we appreciate your work, Frank. Nothing gets past you,” Druskin commented.

Frank continued, “In order to do that, of course, others are being brought into the fold.”

“People we can trust,” Rubenstein said confidently.

Frank looked at him with a shocked look, “Yeah, thanks Mr. Obvious. Somebody get this guy another bottle!”

Crown spoke up, “We trust you, Frank. And whatever help you might need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

The war hawks continued their talk well into the late hours of the frosty night.

Chapter 19

Home Of George H.W. Bush
 West Oaks, Houston Texas
 March 22, 1997

Frank admired the towering stone archways in Bush's new home as he was escorted to see the former president, George H.W. Bush. He was brought by two hulking Secret Service agents into a large study with old Victorian-style furniture and towering walls of books.

The old man rose to greet his old associate and greeted him with a warm smile. "Frank, good to see an old warrior like you. Have a seat." They took their seats in well-preserved classical style chairs the size of thrones as Frank said, "George, always good to see you."

He then peered at the armed guards and then back at his host, "I thought we might have a word in private." The old man eyed his protector shadows and nodded his head to tell them to scat. They obeyed and stepped through the giant double doors.

Frank smiled at the old CIA director, "I'm here to talk business." George looked at him knowingly and responded, "I thought you might. Anytime we talk it seems that some sort of business comes up. What's on your mind, Frank?"

Carlucci began, "As you know, there have been some issues with the current administration." Bush nodded in agreement.

Frank continued, "There are some people who have some large interests in making sure that the next president plays ball a little better."

Bush laughed lightly at the cryptic talk of his CIA associate. "Just cut to the chase, Frank. It's just us having a private conversation. No need for all the tangled inferences. You can be a straight shooter with me."

Frank exhaled deeply. He appreciated little things like that. He didn't get to be so direct much of the time in his line of work. It was a breath of fresh air. "I think that junior might be a good choice for the 2000 election. And not just me, there are some very influential friends of ours who will make it happen, but we need your cooperation."

This brought on even deeper laughter from the ex-prez. He leaned back, laughed, and gripped the armrests tightly. "Junior, huh? I can only imagine why."

Frank couldn't help but chuckle a bit at the absurdity of the proposal. George Jr. didn't exactly have a sterling record of success. He had nearly flunked all of his classes at Yale, hit the bottle too much, and had driven Arbusto Energy to financial ruin. Now he was governor of Texas, but that was more because of his daddy's reputation and connections than anything else.

Bush continued, "Well, I suppose it can be done. Hell, if he can be governor of Texas, then president isn't too much of a stretch."

Frank looked at the old man with sharp eyes and said, "It will be done, but we need your help. Are you with us?"

Bush thought for a moment and then answered, "My help costs lots of money. Not only that, but I need assurances that junior won't be begging me for help every damn day. You'd better have one hell of an advisory staff lined up."

"I assure you, the money is there. It will be extraordinarily lucrative. As for the staff, it will be fool proof."

"That's what I need to hear. Good choice of words, Frank," Bush agreed with a look of bemusement. "So what do you need from me?"

"At the moment, there's a young tech firm that needs some help," Carlucci said.

Bush cut him off, "I'm not much for charity."

Carlucci laughed, "I know. It's an investment, and trust me, it's going to get some very fruitful contracts from the DOD. The catch is, I don't want you investing directly."

The Bush patriarch replied intently, "You have my attention."

Frank continued, "Get some Saudi money involved. You'll get some kickbacks, but it'll be better if you're not directly tied to it."

Bush raised a curious brow and asked in a conspiratorial tone, "What exactly is going on, Frank?"

"I can't give all the details right now. It's a big project, but it's still in the early stages. Can you get some Saudi money?"

"Of course I can. And don't bullshit me on all the details. You know as well as I do that things don't work like that."

"True enough," Frank relented, "let me rephrase. I'll tell you what you need to know."

Bush smirked and leaned back confidently, "That's it, spoken like a true Company man. How much are we talkin?"

"At least five million."

"And the clients are DOD?"

"Will be DOD."

"What's the name of the company?"

"Ptech."

Chapter 20

Rock Creek Park
Washington DC
April 1, 1997

Frank gave a confident smile to his associate Dr. Z. Things were off to a smooth start on the biggest op of Carlucci's career. But now is where things could get hairy. Now is when the outer circle was formed. The right people had to be involved because one slip up could have the whole thing blow up in their collective face, literally. But Frank relished the pressure. He was at the top of his game, and to him, at times, that's all it was, a game.

"Dov, congratulations. You're getting more work. Are you excited?" Frank said with a thick relish of dark sarcasm.

Dr. Z slouched on the smooth park bench and looked enthused, in a forced sort of way. "I'm always excited to see you, Frank. You keep things exciting."

Frank's face widened with the joy of a content predator. "Dov, let me ask you something. How do you feel about the current administration's foreign policy?"

Dr. Z answered without hesitation, "Lackluster, mundane, and downright stupid at times. Everyone's acting like because the cold war is over that we can just sit around puffing cigars and enjoying the victory. It's shameful."

Frank nodded in agreement. "I couldn't agree more. That's why I'm bringing you into a project I'm working on right now. We could use your expertise."

Dov raised a bushy brow. "We?" he asked.

Frank's face dropped, "Don't ask about we."

Dov shot back, "Then don't use the word we."

"Fair enough," Frank continued, "so the current project is a big one. It's main objective is to strengthen American military power. It's secondary objective is to form a cohesive and pragmatic policy agenda for the Middle East and Eurasia."

Dov grinned. The Middle East was his area of expertise. He had served key roles in the Reagan administration in the 80s and had authored numerous papers over the years pushing for a more aggressive policy towards the Middle East. Here was another chance to have some influence. Dov knew that if Frank Carlucci was involved that it was at the highest of levels.

"See, you are excited," Frank said. "There is a group being formed, the Project For A New American Century. It's objective is to find ways to have a more aggressive foreign policy and a stronger military. It will be a panel of defense experts, academics, former government officials, associates of the military, and the like. What we need you to do is guide the group in a certain direction. I'll be giving you some input which I'd like to see be incorporated into the group's work."

"So I'm your conduit," Dov said dejectedly.

"Not at all," Frank responded. "I'll simply be making some suggestions, adding here and there. But I need you to help control the dialogue. If all goes well, your efforts will be greatly rewarded."

Dov said sarcastically, "They always are."

Frank added, "One more thing. You'll be working closely with a military contact. You're civilian, he's military. You need to work together to steer things in the necessary direction."

Dov sighed. He never enjoyed working with military types. "Who is it?"

"Michael Vickers."

Chapter 21

April 1997 – December 1998

The next eighteen months had pivotal moves occur on many fronts. In Turkey, the aftermath of the Catli killing was still causing tremors throughout the Turkish political world, as well as the underworld. And the CIA was still trying to put out the fires.

The shake up had alienated one of the Company's front men, Fethulah Gulen. His Islamic organization, the Alliance For Shared Values, was a key player in recruiting for Middle Eastern mercenary forces. Gulen was considered a powerful enemy by some political and military elite in Turkey. This led to his being secreted out of the country. He was whisked away and put up in a small town in Pennsylvania. After this move, he began setting up mosques and worked diligently on operations within the US.

General Dickerson had been moved back to the USA. He worked for the American-Turkish Council. The Council's main task was to lobby for military aid to Turkey, which would in fact go into the hands of weapons manufacturers via weapons contracts with the Turkish government. However, it also served a dual purpose. Part of the enormous aid given to Turkey went towards the arming and training of a Middle Eastern mercenary army, which had been and would continue to be pivotal in wars past and present.

Ambassador Marc Grossman was moved into a new State Department position. He was now working in Europe and with NATO directly.

As for the Baybasin brothers, their heroin empire grew exponentially. With diplomatic immunity, business was booming. They had labs all over Turkey, and were shipping through Azerbaijan, Brussels, Sarajevo, London, and New York. He was earning his new unofficial title, "The Pablo Escobar of Europe". Of course, the majority of his ill-gotten piles of cash ended up in offshore banks, mainly in Turkish Cyprus. He and his brother still pocketed tens of millions, but billions were put into the coffers of organizations such as the Alliance For Shared Values and the Benevolence International Foundation, and a myriad of other shell companies and charities.

Bob Livingston had done solid work and kept his name out of the papers for his sexual shenanigans. He had helped steer billions through various conduits like USAID. USAID then directed the money to different charities and companies who all, one way or another, were controlled by the same financial interests at the top, be it banks or defense contractors.

For example, a foreign aid package might be approved by congress. The money from the aid package would go towards some high sounding cause like "improving the water quality in Azerbaijan" or "fostering better relationships with the Muslim community". The money actually went to offshore accounts in the names of the charities charged with doing the work, but in fact all of them were shells used to form a giant slush fund that was ultimately controlled by a few corporations at the top.

Billions were also moved covertly via Special Access Programs, which funneled money to defense contractors through the Pentagon. SAPs were above top secret, so only a select few knew of their existence.

Another source of illicit loot came from the monthly blackmail payments from George Soros and Jeff Epstein. The cash was starting to pile up and some of the orchestrators at the top were starting to get anxious. They needed banking regulations to be changed so that money could be invested, reinvested, and turned over multiple times via financial wizardry known as derivatives trading.

The Project For A New American Century had been formed. Most of the participants thought that they were just coming up with ways to create a stronger American defense policy. Most of the work was mundane. However, in between the lines, some very strong language had been inserted in some of the documentation. It was conveniently buried in a pile of paperwork and

legalese. The two that steered the group, Michael Vickers and Dov Zakheim, still hadn't been clued into the full picture of what was to come, but did as they were told, wrote what they were told to write, and said what they were ordered to say.

Frank Carlucci had been busy influencing various think tanks with the objective of war planning for the Middle East and Eurasia. He had associates in the Council on Foreign Relations, the RAND corporation, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and other influential global think tanks. Heavy hitters like Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, and Brent Scowcroft, who were legends in such statecraft and strategy circles, led the way in such institutions to create a strategy and policy for the Middle East in the near future. They didn't know what the catalyst for such action would be. They didn't have a need to know. However, they shared a common interest in more aggressive action in the Mideast and were more than happy to oblige.

News had started to surface of sexual affairs between Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton. Rumors were starting to swirl of impeachment. It was the perfect leverage to insure that banking regulations would change. In the meantime, until the industry was deregulated, Citicorp merged with Travelers Insurance to form Citigroup, which was a violation of banking regulations. However, strings had been pulled by various financial interests, such as Bob Druskin, and the Federal Reserve had given a temporary waiver to Citigroup.

In August of 1998, US Embassies had been attacked in Tanzania and Kenya. This brought heat on assets of the Company like Osama Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and the Hamburg recruiting center of Mohamed Atta. The German authorities were sticking their nose in the Company's business shortly thereafter, so it was decided to move assets into the United States before the heat went too high.

Meanwhile, George W. Bush had been approached by some very influential circles and coached by his father on the prospect of being president. Frank Carlucci started forming Bush's future cabinet.

Chapter 22

Washington DC
December 1998

Frank Carlucci was now in the process of changing gears. To have an op of this magnitude work was one thing, but it wasn't just performing the op. It was the cover-up afterwards. It was the all-out war that would follow for decades. It was something that required not just a master stroke from a mastermind, but it needed a great deal of support from various personnel within the control structure. It was time to bring more people in. It was time to justify unjustifiable actions.

George Tenet had a normally affable look about his handsome Mediterranean features. His line of work had the tendency to change someone's countenance in a hurry, and today was looking like one of those days. Across from him sat Frank Carlucci, a man over twenty years his senior, and not just in age. As far as the Company was concerned, Frank was far higher than the current Director of Central Intelligence.

The fallout from the embassy bombings by Al-Qaeda in Africa necessitated that prominent assets be moved from Europe and the Middle East to the USA. This meant that they would come under a much more scrutinous eye from the FBI. This meant protecting Company assets on US soil, which could be tricky. As always, Frank feigned courtesy while he was asking someone to commit heinous crimes. It was part of his job. And he was one of the best. "George, thanks for meeting me on such short notice. You have a lovely home."

"A pleasure to have you here, Mr. Carlucci," Tenet replied with a tinge of worry in his voice.

"Please, call me Frank. George, I've come to ask for your help in a very important matter that requires the utmost discretion, which I know you're more than capable of, being in your position."

George's face froze. There was an icy feeling in his gut that told him he didn't want to hear what was coming next. "I'll do what I can for you, Frank."

Frank smiled, "George, don't do it for me. Do it for your country, and, above all, do it for yourself. There are certain assets which have been moved onto US soil. It is crucial that they not be meddled with by any domestic agents. It would be a shame if some young FBI man would stick his nose in where it doesn't belong. All I'm asking is that a few people who are invaluable to current and future operations be allowed to do their job."

George took a deep breath. His ego was taking a beating. Here he was, the DCI, and there was obviously a large, well-coordinated operation, involving CIA assets, which he had no idea about. "I wouldn't want to interfere with any crucial operations."

Frank gave a sinister smirk, "That's great to hear, George. I'm sure you'd like to know what assets I'm referring to." He pulled a folded document from his coat pocket and handed it to the DCI. George looked over it anxiously. It took an act of great self-control to not look shocked. Over half the names were on the FBI terror watch list. He looked at Frank, who had a stone-cold expressionless face. He looked nervously back at the paper, then back at Frank. Back and forth, back and forth. George took a deep breath, "One question, if I may. Zawahiri was captured by the Russians a couple of years ago, and miraculously escaped from prison. Could you shed some light on that?"

Frank straightened his over-sized square glasses and stiffened his square jaw, "I could, but that's not necessary." He then stared at George intently.

George twisted his lips, "Anything I can do to help."

The answer Frank Carlucci wanted and nearly always received. "George, don't look so worried. You'll learn later why this is happening. Just one other thing, and then I'll get out of your hair."

George didn't say a word. His expectant look said it all.

“Don’t talk to Freeh about any of this. He is not to be trusted. You only talk to him about this when it’s absolutely necessary to protect assets. You’ll be alerted when this occurs. Do you understand?”

Louis Freeh was the director of the FBI at the time. He hadn’t always cooperated in the past and was frowned upon by certain elements in the power structure. Many in covert circles didn’t trust him and circumvented him as necessary.

George nodded and gulped. He agreed to protect murderers. He was now compromised.

Chapter 23

Key Biscayne FL

January 4, 1999

Bob Livingston was stumbling a bit. He had had a few too many drinks. Alcohol was used to suppress the anxiety that people in his position tended to have. Bob was no different. He had funneled billions of dollars from the American people into the coffers of highly questionable organizations in order to save his own ass.

He fumbled in his khaki pockets to find his electronic card key. When he finally came across it, he found that it wasn't necessary. The door was already cracked open. Talk about a buzz killer. The veteran congressman started sweating profusely. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath.

He slowly came in and shut the door as quietly as an intoxicated man can. His eyes scanned the presidential suite. Everything seemed to be in place in the living room. The kitchen was as shiny as ever and looked untouched. He crept over to one of the kitchen drawers and grabbed a healthy knife. There were two bedrooms that needed inspection. He tiptoed into one of the bedrooms. All clear. The walk-in closet appeared to be in order. Nobody on the bed. How about the bathroom? Nobody in the shower or the hot tub. As he made his way towards the exit he had it in mind to check out the other bedroom. He stepped around the corner and into the master bedroom. He hazily peered at the young girl passed out on the king sized bed and wondered why she was still there. He glanced into the closet and when he turned back around a chiseled-cheshire grin was in his face.

"Hey Bob, long time, no see."

Bob gulped, "Oh, you again."

The congressman's tormentor chuckled, "Oh Bob, you don't sound too happy to see me. Why are you so jumpy?"

Pasty Bob winced. Olive-skinned Az flexed.

"Bob, are you drunk?"

Sigh.

The intruder motioned towards one of the plush, overstuffed sofas in the living room and ordered invitingly, "Let's sit down and have a chat." Livingston sat on one of the sofas. The deep state soldier sat across from him perched proudly on a love seat. "Who's the girl, Bob?"

Livingston nervously touched his large square glasses and wiped some sweat from his brow. What could he say? He didn't have the foggiest idea who she was. All he knew was that she was sent to him gratis. Az pushed, "You don't know her name, Bob? Tisk, tisk, tisk, Bob. And how old is she?"

Bob gave a sloppy shoulder shrug.

Az started to tense his muscles, "Is she here by her own free will, Bob?"

Livingston breathed heavy and started to squirm.

"Bob, did you rape this girl?"

"Certainly not! She was sent here!"

"Sent here? She's not a box of fucking chocolates, you sick prick fuck!"

Bob's booze started to clear away, "Wait a minute, how do you even know I fucked her?"

"Cuz we're on tape, Bob. Shit, you're starting to lose your edge, old man."

Bob narrowed his eyes, "And who are you to judge? You're a god damn hitman! Not exactly Mr. Moral Code, now are you?"

Az sprung himself on Congressman Livingston and gripped his throat. "Bob, it's time you stopped talking and started listening. Unfortunately, I don't get to kill you, despite my deepest desire to do so. I was sent here to give you a fucking promotion."

He pulled his thick hand off of Bob's spindly neck. Bob wheezed and tried to talk. Az cut him off, "I told you not to talk, you perverted fuck. You're going to step down from congress. You're going to start a consulting firm called the Livingston Group. One of your principal clients will be Turkish Cyprus. That's all I know and all you need to know for the moment. You'll get more orders later. For right now, prepare your little capitol hill resignation speech. Any questions?"

Bob looked dazed and confused.

Az stood up, "Good, I didn't think you would. And Bob, I'm taking the girl with me." He swaggered into the bedroom, threw the petite drugged-up victim over his shoulder and walked to the exit. He turned one last time, "Oh, and Bob, if I ever find you with a child again, I'll fucking kill you." With that, Az left the congressman in a whirlwind of surreal confusion.

The girl didn't move an inch on the way to Az's apartment. She could've passed for dead. He carried her on one of his rock-like shoulders and put her down gently as a feather on the sofa. Az pulled up a chair and just stared at her. His mind zig-zagged a mile a minute. What was he thinking? What would he do with her? He eyed the needle tracks littering her petite arms. What would she do when she started having withdrawals? Az started to feel a twinge of regret. He couldn't just leave her there, though, could he? How could he look the other way when someone was obviously being ritually abused by sicko psycho sex freaks? His mind drifted and finally he fell into a half-ass sleep.

A few hours later, the young lass came to. She peered around nervously at the blank walls. Where was she? She had severe mental fog. She looked at Az. A few glances around showed her a plain and orderly surroundings. No frills. Clean. Lonely.

Az awakened with a start. Their eyes locked. She recoiled. Az didn't know what to say. She appeared to be frightened. Az struggled to ask, "What's your name?"

She stuttered, "They call me Mia."

Her well-toned rescuer gave a bewildered look, "Is that your real name?"

Mia thought for a moment. What was real? She didn't know anymore. "If that's what people call me, then yeah, I guess."

He stood up. She flinched. Az tried to comfort, "There's no need to be afraid. My name is Az. You were in bad shape last night and I brought you home."

She looked away and tried to remember. What happened last night? It was a gray collage of blurry imagery. She looked at the strange man before her, "Last night?"

He took a deep breath, "You don't remember. Maybe best if you don't." Mia examined her body. There were scars, bumps, and bruises scattered about. She couldn't remember the half of it.

Az noticed her self-examination. "You won't be getting more of the same here."

Mia had become so accustomed to captivity that she was completely uncertain on what was happening. She looked at him with sad eyes, "How long will you hold me here?"

The hulking agent nearly laughed. "I'm not holding you here. You're free to leave at any time."

Mia's face bore more marks of confusion. "What will happen if I leave?"

This time Az did laugh, "That, I can't answer."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't read your mind, and I don't know what you'll decide to do when you leave here."

Mia blinked rapidly and stared at the floor. She brought up her soft face and locked eyes with Az, "You won't stop me."

Az made his way to the simple, squeaky-clean kitchen, "Nope." He started grabbed a bag of ground coffee and looked back at Mia, "However, there might be some people who are looking for you. If you do leave, it could have some very bad consequences for you. I suggest you stay here until things cool off. Then you might stand a chance."

Mia was confused. A chance at what? Az offered, "You can stay here if you want. You should be safe here. It's your choice."

Choice. That was something Mia had a vague idea about but didn't really understand. Az poured a healthy dose into the coffee maker, "Another thing you ought to consider is the withdrawals."

"Withdrawals?"

Az smirked, "Yeah, those drugs they've been pumping into your system. There'll be consequences when you stop taking them."

Her face dropped, "You're not going to."

Az cut her off, "Give you drugs? No."

"What are the consequences?"

"Vomiting, shivers, and a general hell for a few days."

Mia screamed, "Shit!"

Agent Az huffed, "Yeah, shit. It's only temporary, though. Oh, and by the way, there's another bright side to staying here."

She stared at him nervously.

"I won't rape you or sell you, which is what I'm assuming you've endured for far too long."

Her mind started to have some relatively clear memories. She gasped, "What if they find me?"

Az brought her a steaming cup, "They won't find you."

"How do you know?"

Az thought it would be better to not inform his guest about his line of work. "Just trust me on this one."

Chapter 24

Rural Alabama

February 1999

Vickers was making tracks. Carlucci was trying to keep up. They were on the hunt. This was Vickers home turf. He had studied at the University of Alabama. He'd come a long way since then, but he still loved the thrill of the hunt in the Alabama backwoods.

Vickers looked back and gave a bemused smile at the Company vet. "Come on, old man. You need me to carry you?"

Carlucci was hunched over, trying to catch his breath. "Shouldn't we be perched in a tree or something, waiting patiently?"

Vickers had a good chuckle and came back to meet his reluctant hunting partner. "All right, old man, let's take a break. I don't want you keeling over out here."

Vickers took a moment to admire the dense forest surrounding him. He felt like he was invisible to the rest of the world. It was a great escape for him. Carlucci finally caught his breath and looked Vickers in the eye. "It's time we had a talk. There's a new op that needs your expertise."

The special ops vet gave an interested look and with a slight twinge of a southern drawl said, "Well, I figured you didn't make this trip just for kicks. I thought either you needed to talk in private, or you were gonna bump me off."

Carlucci gave an exhausted laugh, "I could still bump you off, ya know."

"I imagine," Vickers concurred.

Frank started, "So you've been doing solid work at PNAC. I'd like to know what you think about the viability of what's been written so far. Will it lead to action?"

Vickers shook his head to give a resounding no. "You can have all the experts sitting around all day, making recommendations, doing this, and doing that, but at the end of the day, that's not gonna get the job done."

"Exactly how I feel," Carlucci agreed. "So now about that domestic work. When a new administration comes to power in the 2000 election, it'll be time to act. I've got a job for you."

Vickers looked his recruiter up and down, "I'm listening."

Frank said, "Mike, you're a practical guy, and you know as well as I do, that sometimes things need to happen, things that at the time might seem undesirable, but lead to great things in the end. Do you agree?"

Mike nodded, "The end justifies the means."

"Exactly!" Frank exclaimed.

"What are you getting at?" Vickers questioned.

Frank went on to explain the plan in the works to galvanize defense spending and to keep America's military supremacy intact. He named the targets and the methods.

Vickers couldn't believe his ears. He'd done and seen so much, especially during his time in Afghanistan in the 80s. He'd worked with less than admirable characters to get the job done and achieve military objectives, but nothing like this. What Frank was proposing was beyond audacious. An attack on American soil? Airplanes crashing into buildings? He thought it was over the top, doable, but over the top and probably not necessary. His facial expressions said as much.

"Look, I'm all for having a strong military and I think we need to be more aggressive in the Middle East, but isn't this a little extreme?"

Carlucci groaned and shot back, "Extreme? Don't you think that sitting on our thumbs and waiting for our enemies to get stronger is extreme? This is a proactive move, a necessary move. If you won't do your part, I'll find someone else who will."

Vickers looked away and put his hands on top of his mop. He knew how it worked. Now that he was in the know about such a project, he had two options. He could join and reap the benefits, or his career could be over.

Frank read Mike's facial expressions. He could tell that he was leaning towards a reluctant yes.

Vickers asked, "So you've got some Arab proxies for this?"

"Affirmative."

Vickers smacked, "With all due respect, you might want to rethink your strategy."

Carlucci smiled, "That's where you come in. We need your expertise. Nobody knows their strengths and weaknesses like you do. So what are you thinking?"

Vickers replied, "Well, I don't think too much of them as pilots. They're more ground oriented. Those guys with the Mujahideen were vicious and loyal, but for the type of flying you're talking about, I don't think any of them could be up to the task."

Carlucci laughed, "Come on, anyone can be trained to fly a plane."

Vickers said, "Flying is one thing, but hitting targets is quite another. You do what you want, but I'm telling you, you don't want the weak link in an operation like this to be your pilots."

Frank sighed, "We'll see. Right now, half the guys we're thinking of using are in Chechnya harassing the Russians. We're working on getting them visas so they can start flight training in the US soon. When they arrive here, I want you to train the muscle guys. Make sure they can control a crowd using proper tactics. We'll also need assessments of their flight skills."

"Let's just say, hypothetically, that this gets pulled off. The resources necessary to cover it up would be beyond enormous. Not to mention, you'd need complete control in lots of key areas within the administration."

Frank smiled confidently, "You don't worry about things like that, soldier. You do your job, I'll do mine, and everything will fall into place. And by the way, the compensation will be second to none."

"I figured as much," Vickers said with a twinge of uneasiness.

Chapter 25

Crown Residence
Chicago, IL
June 15, 1999

The broad-shouldered banker James Crown had a worried look on his face. He felt his thin gray hair getting thinner by the moment. “Did you see that announcement yesterday? The guy can barely talk!”

He was referring to the official presidential campaign announcement of George W. Bush the day before. It was full of stutters, uncertainty, and some highly uninspired gibber. Carlucci tapped his fingers methodically on the end table and had a laugh at Crown’s nerves. “He’s getting nothing but the best support, from an incalculable number of experts. Not even a guy that incompetent can screw this up.”

All the surrounding crew had a chuckle at the absurdity of the whole ordeal. Desperate times called for desperate measures, but this was over the top audacious. James took a nervous shot of scotch.

Marafino said with jovial relish, “I think James just won’t be happy until the hand of Satan himself goes inside dubya and starts puppeteering. Isn’t that right, Jimmy?”

Carlucci said, “We’ve got the next best thing, public relations. Isn’t that right, Louis?” He was referring to Louis Gerstner, who was high in the corporate structure of McKinsey and Co., one of the most powerful PR firms on the planet. Making black appear to be white was their business, but to help make George W. Bush president of the USA was a different level of dark arts altogether.

Gerstner retorted, “He can’t fail. We won’t let him. Besides, Frank, the cabinet roster that’s in the works is top of the line.”

Rubenstein joined in and rambled quickly, “Yeah, but a cabinet doesn’t do any good if the schmuck blows the election.”

Marafino wiggled his pudgy frame, “It is a hell of a cabinet. Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Dr. Z, Ashcroft, Libby. They’ll play ball, no questions asked.”

“Let’s talk about some good news,” Druskin chirped. “By the end of the year, banking regulations will be much more relaxed, and that mountain of money sitting offshore can start to multiply.”

This was music to all ears in the room. Crown said, “We made Slick Willy nervous enough with the impeachment fiasco?”

“More than enough,” Carlucci said boastfully. “And in congress, we’ve got enough dirt on those guys to build another planet. Hell, we have enough on Denny Hastert alone to build a small moon.”

This brought about raucous laughter. Crown added cautious words of warning, “Well, let’s just remember, it’s a means to an end. This shell game can only go on for so long. We need a legitimate defense budget soon.”

Carlucci boasted, “Jimmy, you worry too much. By 2001, we’ll be selling missiles so fast the computers won’t be able to count our money fast enough.”

Chapter 26

January 2000

A year had passed since Az rescued Mia from the dark clutches of sexual slavery. He had helped take care of her as she slogged through the withdrawals from her chemical master. He cleaned up her vomit, gave her cool towels, and made her soup. He gave her comfort as well as he knew how. It was the first time in his life that he could remember where he had the opportunity to have someone under his care.

They grew to be fond of one another. She was afraid to go out alone so he'd taken the initiative and shown her around the neighborhood. There were walks in the park, snowball fights, trips to the diner, little things like that to make her feel alive. She had grown stronger and, once in a while, she felt as though her recent past were a distant nightmare and that it had not really happened.

Sometimes Az would disappear without a trace for days at a time. When Mia got curious and pried, he usually kept mum and changed the subject. She decided not to push any further. He was all Mia had, and she didn't want to risk her caretaker and protector.

Now they were having a lazy, rainy night sprawled out on the sofa and mindlessly drifting through the channels. Mia murmured, "I can't stand the rain."

Az kept haphazardly shifting through media, "Why is that?"

Mia thought for a moment. Her long term memory still hadn't recovered fully. "I'm not sure. Sometimes I have nightmares, really distorted and surreal. It's the same every time." She paused and looked at the downpour outside. "A terrible storm, so loud and horrendous, I can't even describe. Suddenly, I see two drifting faces, a man and a woman. They're screaming for mercy and being dragged away by twisted metallic bodies. I'm hidden behind an invisible shield and watching it all helplessly."

Az pulled his eyes away from the flashing box. "Who are the faces? What do you think it means?"

Mia answered sadly, "I'm not sure, but I feel as though they're my parents."

Az twisted, "The night your parents disappeared."

"Perhaps. I'll never know for sure." Mia's eyes casually glanced at the TV. She became fascinated. "Who's that?"

Az leaned towards the box, "Who? The guy being interviewed?"

It was a CNBC broadcast. Mia became anxious, "Yeah, who is that?"

"That's Jeffrey Epstein, one of the richest people in the country."

Mia recoiled and grabbed Az's thick bicep. "What's wrong, Mia?"

She started to breathe heavy. "I recognize him. I know him." Az became bewildered. How could this young lady know a billionaire?

Mia's mind drifted. She forced herself to focus. Unclear imagery showed a cackling Epstein and an airplane. There were needles, empty bottles, and full condoms. She shivered and wept.

Now Az was startled. "What is it? How do you know him?"

In a shaky voice, Mia answered meekly, "I was with him."

Az looked at the TV, then back at Mia. Anger started to permeate his pores and tinged through his essence. He looked at her frightened face again. She didn't need to say anything else. Mia had been a used and abused play thing of a psycho-billionaire.

Az's mind drifted to the recent past. He remembered the muscle job he'd done on Soros and Epstein. There was a video disc. He hadn't watched it because that wasn't part of his handlers' instructions. That rat bastard! Epstein was being blackmailed, but for Az, that wasn't enough retribution.

2 weeks later

Little Saint James
U.S. Virgin Islands

Nothing had turned up in Epstein's New York residence. Az was quite adept at speedy, thorough, and silent break-ins. Now it was onto a ridiculous mansion in the tropics. Az knew there had to be something there. It was only a matter of time until something turned up. He thirsted to get his hands on some compromising intel.

A methodical and seamless search flowed through the still of night. The deep state soldier flipped through sofa cushions, flipped fingers through dresser drawers, made intrusive moves under mattresses, and did a sweep of multiple bathrooms.

Leopard prints came up empty. Imported leather and crystal held no offerings. Exotic fabrics showed no clues.

Time to hit the artwork. Abstract frescoes were abundantly scattered around the palace. A prominently placed work drew Az's attention. It was a red and black depiction of a hypercube. He relieved it of its prominent place and struck gold. A lockbox was nestled in wall plaster. Key entry. No combo. Perfect. An efficient pick of the lock let the floodgates open. What do we have here?

A couple stacks of hundreds. A few financial documents. Az wasn't there for financial gain. He wasn't a thief, not in his mind, at least. Bingo. Pictures. Very compromising pictures. Young girls with needles in their arms. Kids being robbed of their decency. Who the hell takes pictures like that? Sickos who think they're untouchable, obviously. Then what's this? A little black book. A quick flip through the pages was very revealing. Az couldn't believe his eyes. Politicians, media personalities, royals, prominent members of the underworld, and financial titans littered the list. This was much bigger than Az originally thought.

He bagged the pictures and black book. He made quick work of making the place look untouched before he locked up. As he moved swiftly to get out of the area, Az's mind raced. He had planned on just sending pictures anonymously to various media outlets to shine unwanted light on the Lolita Express. The black book changed everything. This was criminal. Epstein should be handled by the authorities. Az desperately wanted just to chop Epstein's head off, but that wasn't good enough. He longed for Epstein to suffer. Media wasn't good enough. He wanted Epstein to suffer behind bars and lose everything. He had no choice but to make an anonymous delivery to the FBI.

Chapter 27

Venice FL
April 2000

The young Arab was sweating profusely. Marwan Al-Shehhi was from the Arabian Desert, but nothing had prepared him for the unique sting that Florida humidity could cause. And now he was making his first test flight on a sweltering South Florida afternoon. He stared at the controls blankly. His heart raced and his mouth was parched. The olive-skinned youth nervously adjusted his round spectacles and ran a hand through his quickly thinning jet-black hair.

The crusty old flight instructor who accompanied the aspiring foreign pilot was not very amused. He'd been doing this for decades and had just about seen it all. He rolled his old, deep blue eyes and said gruffly, "Hey kid, you gonna get this thing off the ground before sunset?"

Al-Shehhi didn't think much of the old man's jokes. He looked over at the seasoned instructor and shot a look of disdain. A few moments later and the Cessna was lifting valiantly into the air. A split second later, and it was dipping wildly and banking hard to the left. The odd couple was getting thrown around like ragdolls. The only mercy was provided by the seat belts. The instructor grabbed the control wheel and helped his pupil, who was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, stabilize the small craft. "What the hell are you doing?" the incredulous old man yelled. The young student was breathing heavy and had a state of shock on his face. "Ok, ok, don't worry," the instructor yelled in a disconcerting tone. "I'll help ya set her down."

Marwan's hands dropped from the yoke and the old man eased the little mechanical bird down with a smooth fluidity. Once on the ground safely, Marwan began to slowly look around as he made a futile attempt to dry his forehead with his hands. "What happened?" he asked with awe.

"Go ahead and unstrap yourself and step out. Get some fresh air and go home," the old man coaxed.

The young Arab had a confused look on his face. He'd been studying for months and had done well enough on the exams, so why was he having so much trouble flying? He started walking away slowly when the old man yelled from behind, "Tomorrow's another day. Keep at it."

Marwan nodded with sadness. For now, though, he'd go out with his friends and kill the pain of failure.

9 hours later

Tampa Gold Club
Tampa, FL

Low bass tones, courtesy of the Notorious B.I.G. ripped through the sleez-filled air and helped aid the gyration of genitals. A topless blond with young silky skin and ten pounds too much for a modeling career hung upside down on a pole with her mighty long legs. The room was about half-full of men of all ages, shapes, and sizes.

A group of three young olive-skinned men lounged in a VIP booth and looked up with admiration. They'd been drinking for a few hours and it was starting to show. The ringleader, Mohamed Atta, had his oversized head perched loosely on one hand as a wobbly elbow supported the weight. One of his friends, Marwan Al-Shehhi, sat slouched back in the booth like a wannabe mobster from decades past. He pulled a little vial from the pocket of his Miami Vice style shirt and shot a little Peruvian marching powder into both his nostrils, left then a quick right. Their companion, the boyish looking Ziad Jarrah, gave a jealous look to Marwan and said, "Hey, share the wealth. Pass that over here."

Marwan smiled slyly and tossed the dark little vial to his friend and said, "Aren't you happy we're not freezing our balls off in Germany anymore?" All three bellowed with laughter. They had all done more time than they wanted in Hamburg.

Atta added with a sloshy voice, "And we're not fighting in the Balkans or Chechnya."

"Cheers to that," said a bug-eyed Ziad. Then he tossed the vial to Atta and asked, "But what are we doing here, man?"

Atta huffed the powder, tried to catch his breath, then answered, "You mean besides getting paid bags full of cash to learn how to fly?"

Marwan said impatiently, "Yeah, man. Is there a mission? Don't you think it's a little weird we're living like kings and don't have an objective?"

"Relax," Atta said reassuringly. He got distracted by a seductive smile from a passing vixen and then continued, "This shit is making you paranoid. Yeah, we'll have a mission one day. We're soldiers. But for right now, just enjoy the ride."

Ziad started laughing uncontrollably. Atta and Marwan looked at each other with raised eyebrows. "What is it, Ziad? We gotta cut you off, or what?"

The baby-faced Ziad answered, "I was just thinking, if we suck as pilots, maybe they'll just keep training us forever, and all we'll have to do is just keep sucking and getting paid."

They all had a hardy chuckle at the absurdity of the idea. Then Marwan added, "Yeah, just like her." He nodded towards a tall black girl with hyper-eye-popping curves.

"Hey boys," came a tantalizing voice from seemingly out of nowhere. An exotic Latina with generously gifted features leaned over their table slowly and asked sweetly, "Is there anything I can do for you boys?"

Six eyes bulged out. Three mouths dropped open. There was a speechless second which seemed like eternity, then Ziad flamboyantly answered, "There's lots of things you can do for me."

The mocha-skinned girl gave a warm smile and, with a giggle, asked seductively, "Is that right?" Ziad cocked his head back arrogantly and said, "That's right. I've got quite an imagination. Have a seat."

The almond-eyed beauty sat next to Ziad as his companions looked on with admiration at his bravado. The girl touched Ziad's arm and asked, "What did you have in mind?"

The drugged up pilot-in-training reached into the cargo pocket of his pants and pulled out a thick stack of hundreds. He slapped the stack down on the table. "What'll that get me?" he asked earnestly as he looked her up and down eagerly.

Her eyes lit up like neon in Vegas. Atta freaked and yelled, "We gotta go. Thanks for the company. Come on guys."

Ziad gave his friend an incredulous look. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Atta got in his face, dropped his voice an octave, scowled, and growled, "We're fucking going right fucking now."

Not liking the abrupt change of events, the long-legged Latina quietly strode away as the stare-down continued. Ziad sniffed loudly, stood up, and balled up his fists. "What's your problem, huh? What the fuck is your problem?"

Atta looked down on his subordinate with cold eyes and then turned to look at Marwan, who was busy gawking around, lost between eye candy and a drug-fueled bro fight. "Let's go," Atta commanded.

Marwan went with Atta towards the exit while Ziad hesitantly joined them from behind. Once in the car, a used Chevy Cavalier, Atta spoke as he stared at the steering wheel. "Do you know why we have a piece of shit car?"

Uncomfortable silence followed by a wave of uneasiness.

"We have this car so that we don't draw unwanted attention to ourselves. We don't have a Ferrari, a Rolls Royce, or even a fucking Mercedes. We drive a beat up old Chevy Cavalier in order to keep a low profile. And what do you do? You go throwing stacks of hundreds around in public

like you're God damn Scarface or something. Do you wanna know a secret, Z?" He turned to his unhappy passenger who was staring blankly out the window.

Atta shouted, "Answer me, you little shit!"

Ziad replied with a tone of drunken bravado, "Yeah, I wanna know a secret,"

Atta yelled as he slammed his hand into the wheel, "The secret is that you're not fucking Scarface!"

Chapter 28

Washington DC

May 2000

"Get in," Carlucci hastily ordered. He was leaning towards the passenger window so far his colossal glasses nearly dropped off his face. The military man outside got in with one quick sweeping motion.

Carlucci sped off. The black Mercedes jumped ahead effortlessly. "I trust you enjoyed the sweltering heat of South Florida."

"I suppose so, sir."

"I hope you took time to refresh yourself with a decent cocktail or two."

"I did my best, sir."

"Tell me some good news," Frank said enthusiastically.

Vickers looked hesitantly at his driver. He hoped the message he was about to deliver didn't result in any roadside repercussions. "Your pilots suck," he said bluntly.

Frank did a double take. "I don't like jokes."

Vickers huffed, "I wish it were a joke, but it's not. Your pilots are horrendous. Whatever you've got going on, if it depends on those guys having any competence at the helm of any type of aircraft, then, well." He stopped for effect and didn't finish. To his surprise, the old spook to his left didn't do anything drastic. He appeared to be taking it quite well.

Frank stopped at a red light and glared out the window. Vickers hoped he would tell him to get out. He knew nothing good could come of the rest of this meeting. Frank spoke with conviction, "We'll just have to make alternative arrangements, that's all."

Vickers eyes darted around. He wasn't sure what to do. He tried not to groan. "Sir, if I may ask."

Frank shut him down with a dirty look, "No, you may not."

"Perhaps I can be of some help," Vickers said with slight protest in his voice.

"You know all you need to know at this point, is that clear, soldier?"

"Crystal, sir," Vickers said with a bit of southern twang.

"What do you want to do after you retire from the military?"

"I thought I might get into private industry."

"I thought you might have that ambition. I have a feeling that if you can do your job and not rock the boat, that your desire might become a reality. Do you understand?"

"One hundred percent, sir."

Carlucci shoved an envelope in front of Vickers face. "That is a report that I need you to have reviewed by PNAC. Take note of all positive and negative mention regarding that document and report back to me."

"Yes, sir."

Carlucci shined a shit-eating grin, "And as for the operation itself, we need to have a talk about a key ingredient called Ptech."

Oval Office

Red-faced Bill clenched his jaw. It was quite the "A" list he was thumbing through. First the Lewinsky fiasco, and now this. He tossed the little black book down and looked sternly across the table.

His counterpart, a pasty Attorney General named Janet Reno, stared back. She explained, "FBI director Freeh brought this to me recently. Apparently, according to him, it showed up at FBI headquarters anonymously."

Bill's face flushed further, "How convenient."

Janet winced with irony, "I thought so." There was an ominous silence. "I thought that, considering all circumstances, it might be, how shall we say, politically expedient to sit on this."

Bill gave a sharp look, "You did the right thing, Janet. After all, we can't really authenticate a thing like this, now can we?"

Janet's face showed one thing but said another, "Well, I suppose not. At the moment, we have no way of knowing, that is."

Bill looked back at the little black ticking timebomb. Janet asked nervously, "What should I do with it, sir?"

Clinton's flushed face twisted, "Until it can be authenticated and becomes politically expedient to do so, I think putting it away for safe keeping seems to be the prudent move right now."

The hefty A.G. huffed, "I'll make that happen, sir."

"You're dismissed, Miss Reno."

FBI NY Office
June 2000

John O'Neill threw a fist down on his desk in frustration. He'd been investigating various terrorists for years. He was always weary of the thick restraining tentacles of bureaucracy, but had always taken it with a grain of salt. But recently his job had become much more difficult. The CIA's counter-terrorism center, specifically the Bin Laden unit known as Alec Station, had recently been put under new management. The new top dog, who had been hand picked for the appointment by Director Tenet himself, was making O'Neill's investigations much more difficult. It was making any actions against known terrorists practically impossible. It was almost as if the new man in charge of Alec Station, Richard Blee, was subverting the FBI on purpose.

O'Neill swiveled in his office chair and wondered to himself, "Why was Blee so erratic and hot-tempered? Not to mention downright uncooperative at times. He had been caught on multiple occasions withholding key information about certain people. Some of those people were known to be in the United States, for chrissake! And what about Tenet? Was he oblivious, incompetent, or was there something deeper and more sinister afoot?"

John rubbed his big head in disgust. He chugged the rest of his coffee and straightened his skinny tie before looking at the document again. It was a message from FBI director Louis Freeh, stating that O'Neill's most recent request for information from Alec Station could not be released at this time due to "ongoing CIA investigations" and "national security".

John took a deep breath and his mind ran wild with various tidbits and connections he'd made in the past couple of years. Osama Bin Laden had attended a mosque opening in the US recently. The mosque had been funded by the Gulen Movement. Gulen had been given asylum in the US after the Catli affair in Turkey. Why was Gulen being protected if he obviously had connections to Bin Laden? And where was all of Gulen's money coming from all of a sudden? New mosques and schools financed by Gulen had been popping up like weeds all over the US recently. O'Neill could trace the money to Cyprus, but the trail ended there. He couldn't do any further investigations because of the tight banking regulations there. It was over John's head.

In addition to that, Zawahiri had been to the US multiple times in recent years. Mohamed Atta was known to have entered the US in the past year. Atta was associated with OBL and Zawa. Was Bin Laden behind all this? Certainly not. He had deep pockets, but he couldn't get visas to enter the US for known and suspected terrorists. This went deeper, which is what disturbed John the most. One key fact that ate away at the veteran FBI investigator was the common thread shared by Bin Laden, Gulen, and Zawahiri. All of them, on some level either now or in the past, had direct ties to the US government.

And now the CIA was basically thwarting forward progress on John's investigation. His anger was boiling over. Richard Blee was basically slapping John around and telling him to fuck off. And to top it off, FBI director Louis Freeh seemed powerless. But O'Neill wouldn't give up.

Chapter 29

Waldorf Astoria Presidential Suite
 NY, NY
 January 20, 2001

It was done. George W. Bush was now President of The United States. It had been a hell of a mission to get that accomplished. Untold billions had been spent on propaganda, lawyers, advisers, speech therapists, speech writers, psychologists, and countless other experts who propped up the former underwhelming Yale student of ill repute.

But that wasn't all. The election had come down to the razor close and hotly contested state of Florida. In order to secure a Bush victory, lots of bribes had to be paid. Intimidations had to be made. Judges coerced. Recounts stopped. It required muscle with a PR finesse like no other job in history.

But now it was done and a certain group of influential bomb peddlers were having a victory party. They were assembled comfortably in one of the spacious living rooms of the presidential suite. Bob spoke proudly, "A fine job, gentlemen. We're moving in the right direction."

The group raised their intricately crafted glasses and did an air-cheers from across the room. Frank motioned to Louis Gerstner and said, "McKinsey does a hell of a job, Louis. Do you think your experts can sell what's coming next?"

Louis groaned and pleaded, "Damnit, Frank. Can I please just enjoy the moment and relax for a minute?"

Frank shook his head emphatically, "No, men like us, we never rest. All the psyche-gurus we can get our hands on need to sell the War On Terror. Get ready."

The men had a sinister laugh at the absurdity of it all. Rubenstein's face flushed red, "A war on terror! Who can believe such nonsense!"

"That's what PR does, it makes nonsense possible," Marafino added.

Druskin interceded with his typically steady and understated tone, "Frank, how are things on your end?"

"Not perfect, but we'll get the job done," Frank said confidently.

Rubenstein pried, "Anything we need to discuss?"

Frank gave an emphatic no and added, "Operations are my department. I'll handle it. How are things on the financial end?"

Druskin answered dryly, "Things are moving along smoothly. We've got more conduits shuffling money around than I can keep track of. No one will ever get to the bottom of that paper trail."

Marafino got a concerned look about him, "So just to be clear, everything is set to clean up the Pentagon funds?"

Carlucci gave a cheshire-grin, "I've got just the guys for the job. My old friend Donnie will announce that there have been some accounting issues the day before the mission goes hot. Dr. Z will be the comptroller in the new administration and will be tasked with investigating the accounting problems. Not only that, but people will be so distracted with terror on TV that they won't give the money a second thought."

"And the documentation itself?" Druskin asked.

Carlucci smiled, "Destroyed, coincidentally, during the mission."

They all cackled mightily. Marafino groaned with pleasure, "That's quite a coincidence. I gotta hand it to you Frank, you sure do cover all the bases."

Carlucci asked, "Bob, did you get everything set between Deutsche and Marsh?" Bob nodded, "I've got that end under control. You just make sure the mess I make gets cleaned up."

George H.W. Bush's Home
Houston Texas
February 2001

"Congratulations on junior's victory," Frank said warmly to his host.

"Cut the horse shit, Frank."

"Excuse me?"

"You know damn well that my boy is no genius."

"I wasn't aware being a genius was a requirement for sitting in the oval office."

Bush grimaced at Frank's dry humor. "I don't know what you're up to, but you're gonna spill the beans right now, Frank."

"What are you getting at?"

"I did some digging into that company you had me find Saudi investors for. Ptech has got quite the impressive clientele. DOD, FAA, FBI, IRS, the list goes on. The software they use is what really caught my eye, though. Whoever is using that software has access to and can see what's happening within those agencies in real time. It's like a bird's eye view over many key institutions. And not just a view, it has the actual capacity to take action in real time within those agencies. Did you know that, Frank?"

Carlucci gave the former president and current business partner an annoyed look. Bush continued with a forceful voice, "The question I have is, why wouldn't we want Carlyle to invest in something this intriguing, this powerful? Surely it will generate substantial dividends, no?"

Frank held up a halting hand, "Carlyle shouldn't have its name attached to Ptech, or yourself, for that matter."

"Why not?"

"It's being used in an ongoing operation," Frank said undaunted.

"An operation that I am not to be privy to?"

"I had to wait," Frank said.

"Wait for what?" Bush asked, incredulous.

"For junior and his merry band of warhawks to get the CEO position of America."

"The majority stakeholders needed a new CEO, a bit more pliable, is that right?"

"Something like that."

"So what's the op?"

"I need a favor first."

"No more favors, Frank, until I know what the op is."

Frank went on to explain the plan to blow up three buildings in the world trade center complex and blow a hole in the Pentagon.

"War on terror, huh? Yeah, I suppose people are gullible enough to buy it, if they're scared enough," Bush relented. "So what do you need from me?"

"Your son Marvin is involved with a company called Securacom, right?"

"Correct."

"And they have security contracts with the World Trade Center?"

"Hell, I don't know. Do they? I bet if you'd ask Marv, he wouldn't even know."

"We need some of our ops guys to have access to the WTC."

"Access for what?"

"I just told you what's going to happen. Use your imagination."

Bush sighed, "Send your guys to Marv. I'll make sure they get hired."

"One more thing. Don't tell junior about what's going on. The last thing we need is for him getting involved."

"I imagine."

"Oh, and I almost forgot. I'd hold onto your stake in Carlyle if I were you, George."

"You think I need you to tell me that?"

Marsh And McLennan Offices
World Trade Center
NY, NY

Paul Bremer was as busy as they come. A cool character and former diplomat, he was now involved in a professional services firm, Marsh and McLennan, that held offices in the World Trade Center. Marsh was in the midst of developing new financial transaction software that was making the revolution of paperless transactions a reality. Now Paul was meeting with a prospective new client.

Paul gave a confident handshake and smile, "Mr. Druskin, it's a pleasure to speak with you. How are things over at Citi?"

Druskin gave an easy look, "Things are picking up nicely, especially now that the banking regulations have changed."

Paul offered a seat. They sat back and relaxed in throne-like seats. Druskin explained, "Paul, I'm very impressed with the new software that Marsh has been developing."

Paul beamed, "Yes, it's very exciting. So far our biggest client, Deutsche Bank, has been very pleased and we're hoping this could be the start of a revolution."

Druskin's long face nodded politely, "Yes, that's what I've come to talk with you about. There is a financial plan in the works which requires the seamless, high-tech services that your company offers."

Bremer perked up. This was big. "I'd be anxious to see what you require."

Druskin handed him some sheets, "This is strictly confidential."

"Absolutely."

Bremer looked over the names of financial institutions, dollar figures, trading volumes, and other pertinent information given in the summary of what was a highly complex web. His eyes bulged out. What the hell was this old man thinking?

Paul looked at Druskin. The old man was stoically waiting. "Mr. Druskin, this is quite the proposal."

"Indeed it is. Can you handle that volume?"

Paul nearly shit his pants, "Well, yes, I believe we can. What time frame did you have in mind? This is a huge project."

Druskin explained, "The deadline is September 11 of this year."

Paul's heart leaped. That was pushing it. "If you don't mind, Mr. Druskin, some of these investments seem a little risky. Before I commit to anything, is there something I should know?"

"This is strictly confidential."

"Of course."

"Don't be in your office on September 11. You'll be contacted with further instructions later. Are we clear?"

Paul agreed, "Yeah, we're clear."

Chapter 30

Washington DC
March 2001

"You've come a long way since our days at Princeton," Carlucci said as he smiled at his old roommate Donald Rumsfeld and slapped him on the back. Rumsfeld's normally brusquely-featured face gave a glowing smile and returned a friendly slap to his old friend. "You haven't done so bad yourself, Frank."

Dr. Z said smartly, "I'm so honored to be part of this reunion." Frank looked at Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense, and then back at Dov Zakheim, now Undersecretary of Defense. Then he looked back at Donnie and said, "You gotta teach this guy some respect."

Donnie said to Frank jokingly, "So for what purpose have we been summoned by the great Frank Carlucci? We have real jobs that need attending to, don't forget that."

Frank looked mock offended and replied to his Princeton alum, "Hey, nobody works harder than me, Donnie. You know that. But actually, I need to speak with both of you about some very important work that could use your expertise."

Dov took off his round spectacles and rubbed his eyes wearily. Donnie shrugged and ordered gruffly, "Ok, get on with it. What are you up to?"

Frank pulled an envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to his old Ivy League buddy. It was the report from Sentient World Simulation. "Have a look at this, both of you, and then we'll talk."

Frank sipped a piping hot black coffee and waited anxiously for the reactions. He was sure they'd play ball. After all, Dr. Z was a staunch advocate of aggressive action in the Middle East. As for Donnie Rumsfeld, he knew he'd back his old friend from their college days. He was also as pragmatic as they come. So what about a few thousand people killed? In their world, the end always justified the means. The results of the computer simulation were scientific proof. Who could argue with scientific necessity?

Rumsfeld finished scanning the document and handed it over to Dr. Z. A couple minutes later, and Dov was twitching his mustache with fascination.

"So I have your attention?" Frank asked smugly.

Dov took a deep breath. He remembered the paper that had been published by PNAC the previous year titled "Rebuilding America's Defenses". In that paper, it was said that some type of "catalyzing event" on the scale of a "new Pearl Harbor" would help increase defense spending and keep America's military strong. Now Dr. Z was putting two and two together. "You have my attention," Dr. Z said curtly.

Frank laid out what preparations had already been made to create such an attack. Rumsfeld asked in an offended tone, "Why the hell are you just now filling me in on this?"

"I had to be sure all the right pieces were in place," Frank explained.

"You mean the election," Dr. Z interjected.

Frank snickered, "Nothing gets past you, Dovey. So now that there is an administration more sympathetic to the necessity of defense, we can go full steam ahead."

Rumsfeld and Zakheim looked at each other. They both knew the same thing. If Frank Carlucci had been this involved in an operation this long, it was going to happen, one way or another. They could either ride the waves, or swim against the tide. And they both knew that if they rode that wave, they would be richly rewarded.

Rumsfeld sighed and looked his old college buddy in the eye. "So who's the patsy?"

Frank answered, "I've recently learned that Osama Bin Laden is fighting a rare disease called Marfan Syndrome. He hasn't got long to live, so he'll be perfect."

Dr. Z laughed and said, “You’re going to send the military on a hunt for a man in a hospital bed?”

Frank said smugly, “If it’s on TV a million times, people will believe it. They’ll attack anywhere. But he’s just the beginning. A “War on Terror” will give us carte blanche to attack. The possibilities are limitless. You saw it yourself in that report. It’s not my opinion, it’s a scientific certainty.”

“A dead boogeyman,” Rumsfeld stated with irony. “You certainly have some flair, don’t you? You old dog.”

Dr. Z said, “I imagine you’re not telling us this for our own personal amusement.”

Frank replied, “Once again, Dovey, your masterful perceptions serve you well.” He paused and sipped at another coffee. “First things first, the pilots aren’t working out, and there needs to be a different way to get those birds in the right place.”

Rumsfeld laughed so hard he nearly fell out of his seat. “You don’t have pilots? Frank, have you lost your edge in your old age?”

Frank’s face dropped. He straightened his glasses in a slow, sophisticated manner and continued, “To ensure that everything works the way it’s supposed to, it seems evident that a more reliable method should be used. Dr. Z, you spent years working at System Planning Corporation. I’ve looked into the technology they have and came across something quite intriguing. Remote control flight systems.”

Dr. Z shuffled around in his seat. “Yeah, those were developed a few years ago.”

Frank grinned, “I need four of those systems.”

Dr. Z muttered, “But”

“No buts,” Frank cut him off. “It’s absolutely essential.”

Dov huffed, “You can’t get good pilots, so now I have to do this?”

Frank said defensively, “Even some of the best pilots in the world would find it difficult to hit these targets. And Arab pilots are, shall we say, less than stellar, at least the ones at my disposal.”

“Ok, ok,” Dov agreed reluctantly.

Carlucci turned his attention to Rumsfeld, who was listening with a bemused look on his gruff face. “Donnie, you are to help organize and facilitate war games exercises on the big day.”

Rumsfeld nodded slowly, “Distractions galore.”

The cunning Carlucci explained, “That’ll be key. We’ll be in contact on the details over the next few months. Another task that will need attention from both of you is the Pentagon budget.” He paused for effect. “Dr. Z, as the comptroller of the DOD, you might find certain accounting discrepancies if you were to dig into certain aspects of the defense budget, especially some Special Access Programs that were initiated a few years back.”

Zakheim narrowed his eyes, “How much of a discrepancy?”

Frank said starkly, “Perhaps in the neighborhood of two trillion.”

Rumsfeld quipped, “All to good causes, I’m certain.”

“A great work, to be sure,” Frank stated proudly. “Before the big day, Donnie, you have the privilege to come clean on the matter, and the next day the papers will unfortunately be lost, and the people will forget due to preoccupation with other matters.”

He slapped Dr. Z on the back and said, “And you, Dovey, have the greatest task of all. You have the privilege of the official hunt for the misplaced funds.”

“Fuck you, Frank,” Dr. Z howled sharply. “No, wait, double fuck you, Frank. You’re putting that on me? Two god damn trillion? With a T?”

“A capital T,” Carlucci cracked.

Dr. Z shook his head and stared up at the gray sky for a moment. What had he gotten himself into?

Frank mockingly consoled his suddenly reluctant counterpart, "Don't be so dramatic, Dovey! It'll be a piece of cake, very sweet, lucrative cake. All you have to do is pretend to put your best foot forward, send a bunch of accountants on a wild goose chase, shrug your shoulders, and say that you tried your best."

Dr. Z contended, "You don't think there will be any political repercussions to this?"

Frank shook his head with an emphatic no, "People will be too worried about their new enemy. Some little old accounting problems will be subconsciously cast into a sea of fear-induced forgetfulness. Trust me."

Rumsfeld interrupted, "Aside from the money, Frank, I have a question about the planes themselves. Actually, it's more about the passengers. I don't see any good reason to do away with so many people. They could just as well serve a purpose."

Frank didn't quite understand Donnie's point. "I don't follow."

"Well," Rumsfeld continued, "Why not make use of all of our resources, similar to the recent operations in the Balkans."

Frank perked up. That hadn't occurred to him. Why needlessly murder hundreds of people on the airplanes. It made sense. To him, it was like burning crude oil rather than selling it for a profit. Why didn't he think of that before?

"You're a genius, Donnie. But how can we get them from A to B? I'm not sure there will be enough time."

"I'm sure with Dr. Z's computerized flight system, and with all the drill distractions, it should be possible. Take off, land at a defunct military base, offload the passengers, then take off again for the targets. You wouldn't even need to waste the mercs."

Another good point. The hijackers could be used in future wars. Why waste well-trained mercenaries in a plane crash?

Frank picked it up from where his college chum left off, "And we'll have some Company men there to decide where they'll be most useful."

"And they'll be pronounced dead, so no one will be looking for them."

"Like casualties of war."

"Exactly."

Chapter 31

FBI Headquarters
Washington DC
June 2001

FBI Director Louis Freeh held his gaze on a beautiful summer day outside. He had been director for about eight years. It was a bittersweet job, but had become much more bitter as of late. He turned his attention back to the man seated behind him at his desk.

Freeh's droopy eyes looked at John O'Neill and said, "John, there's nothing I can do. My hands are tied. I'm sorry. That S.O.B. at Alec Station is an absolute nightmare. Not that the CIA has ever been that cooperative, but it's gone to a whole new level lately."

O'Neill's husky frame leaned forward and asked, "What do you imagine is going on?"

Freeh sighed and swiped at his receding hairline. "I don't know, and to be honest with you, it's probably better if I don't know. Or you, for that matter."

"You met with Agent Blee?"

Freeh grimaced and confirmed, "Yes, I had the unfortunate experience of dealing with Agent Blee. He's like a broken record, only angry and butt ugly." Both agents had a forced laugh. "He kept saying national security this, and we're handling that." O'Neill cut off his boss, "Did he say handle, or investigate?"

"I believe he said handle, but bear in mind, he's hard to listen to."

"Well, if the CIA is handling them, then that doesn't necessarily mean they're investigating them," O'Neill said.

"True, but like I said, it might be best to cut our losses. We're outnumbered and outgunned."

"I just don't get it. It's as if Bin Laden's whole inner circle is untouchable."

Both men paused to reflect. They had grown weary of the ever-expanding bureaucracy and inter-agency struggles. There had always been a gray area with certain aspects of the intelligence community, but it was quickly reaching dangerously new heights.

"John, I might as well go ahead and tell you. I'll be announcing my retirement from the FBI later this month. I wanted to give you a heads up, but keep this between us, ok?"

O'Neill was saddened by the news, but it didn't come as a surprise. He had been considering the same. "Louis, thanks for letting me know. I must say I'm not shocked, though. I've been thinking along the same lines. Maybe I can get a job with less work, and more pay."

Freeh chuckled and said, "You must be considering the private sector."

"Yeah, I heard through the grapevine that the World Trade Center is looking for a new head of security. I think it's worth looking into."

Chapter 32

Kizer Pharmaceutical Corporation Laboratory
 London England
 July 2001

Professor Rogue hummed methodically. He had just finished lunch and was walking briskly back to his office. The obscene brightness of the hallway didn't have any effect on the veteran scientist. He'd been numbed to the bright lights in mundane halls like this. That wasn't the only thing he was numb to. The sly old man of science had taken part in too many black operations to count. To him, however, they weren't black operations. They were just events which were necessary for scientific advancement. He didn't view all of the individuals that he'd helped victimize over the years as human at all. They were fountains of data, to be poked and pricked as necessary. They were unwilling organ donors. They were fodder for experimental drugs and genetic manipulation. The ones who were too beautiful to experiment with were drugged up and sent off into sex slave hell. Professor Rogue decided who would go where and be used for what purpose. He did it all with a meticulous and calm demeanor, much like a normal person would do a mundane task like organizing a desk.

The cold-blooded scientist rounded the corner and opened the double doors to his office. Once the door was shut behind him, he turned and was startled by a man suddenly seated at his desk. The burly man had his feet up on the desk and his hands behind his head in an overly relaxed manner. Professor Rogue gasped at his chest and his sharply defined white beard stretched thin as his face dropped.

"Good afternoon, professor!" the intruder stated with mock warmth in his voice. "This chair is quite comfortable, if I do say so myself!"

Rogue's eyes squinted hard and he asked with an annoyed tone, "Can't we just make appointments, like normal people? Why all this cloak and dagger stuff?"

The stranger took his feet down and twisted his face with confusion. "Because we're not normal people, you silly old goat!"

The professor sighed loudly and said, "Well, get on with it, then. I haven't got all day."

The chiseled specimen smiled mockingly and said, "Very well, professor. There's a new job that needs your expertise."

Professor Rogue shot a delighted look at his uninvited guest and said, "Ok, where, when, and how many?"

The stern face spoke back, "USA, September 11, approximately three hundred. You'll be sent details later. Any questions?"

The professor knew that last part was a joke. Questioning was frowned upon, to say the least.

"No questions. I must get back to work now."

"Always a pleasure to see you, professor."

Professor Rogue gave a nervous nod and the stranger showed himself out.

Boston Massachusetts
 August 2001

The baby-faced engineer was nervous. He was only in his mid-twenties and now he was being thrown into the world of classified projects. It was like he was being punished for being good at his job. He was one of the only employees at System Planning Corporation who knew how to install Remote Pilot Systems.

He sucked in a deep chunk of late night humid air and waited impatiently for his ride to show up. He'd recently been assigned to a project by his bosses and was told to not ask any questions, that it was a matter of national security. This was the nature of government contract work.

His scrawny and gangly frame was startled by a vehicle that appeared quickly from the rear and came to an abrupt stop. It was an American Airlines van. A muscular figure gave the youngster a menacing look out the passenger window and ordered coldly, "Get in."

The lanky figure nervously obeyed and hopped into the passenger seat. The van sped off and headed for Logan Airport. For the newbie, the silence and uncertainty was torturous. For the driver, who was a veteran of covert ops, silence was preferable. He didn't enjoy chatty partners, especially when it was some geeky kid. With a million uncertainties in his head, the unwilling asset tried to alleviate himself by seeking answers.

He managed to squeeze out shakily, "So, how long have you worked for American Airlines? Do you like it?"

The steely driver gave a sour look and sped up. Baby-face continued, "So what's your name?"

The man twice his size rolled and popped his neck and shot back, "Shut the fuck up, kid."

Unable to keep quiet, the engineer asked, "Could we at least have some music? What music do you like?"

"Kid, if you don't zip it right now, I'm gonna sew your lips together with cactus needles. I don't know you, and you don't know me. We have a job to do. That's it. No questions, and certainly no answers."

"Sorry, this is my first job like this," the ghost white engineer said.

No response.

A few minutes later and the odd couple arrived at Boston Logan Airport. The vet tossed a badge to baby face and muttered, "You work for American. If anyone talks to you, don't fuck up."

"Thanks for the pep talk."

They rolled slowly into the service entrance, showed ID, and went on about their business. The bulky vet located the first plane they were tasked with modifying. Within minutes, the boy genius was busy installing the Remote Pilot System into the electronic core of the aircraft. The vet stood by dutifully to make sure no nosey bastards started snooping around.

Suddenly, the brainy one dropped one of his tools and exclaimed, "Shit."

"What's the problem?"

"No problem."

The vet took a peek over baby face's shoulders and saw an ungodly mess of wires strewn all over the place. "Have you ever actually installed one of these before?"

"Only test models."

The vet groaned and with a tone of disbelief asked, "What do you mean, test models?"

"Well, this is new technology, only tested in a lab. This is the first time it's going into the field, as far as I know."

"But you can install it, right?"

"In theory."

"Fuck."

An hour later and the boy genius pronounced the first job done. They moved onto the next plane and he installed the guidance system in half the time. The odd couple took off and the vet dropped baby face back off where he had found him.

A week later the same odd couple did the same job on two planes at Dulles Airport.

Chapter 33

World Trade Center Complex
New York City
September 8, 2001

The building was dark. It was a planned power down that had the workers at the WTC off guard, especially in the South Tower, where so many financial institutions held critical electronic data.

Anyone who asked why power was being shut off was given the vague answer that it was “maintenance and upgrades on critical infrastructure”. The upper levels of the buildings were evacuated and only security personnel kept an eye on the maintenance workers.

Swarms of men in coveralls and other blue collar attire busily worked throughout the day. Large rolls of cable were lined methodically throughout many of the upper floors of the North and South Towers as well as WTC 7. Certain areas were also selected for fresh paint jobs. They were no ordinary cables and it was no ordinary paint. Both concealed various explosives strong enough to bring down a large building with a steel core. All that was needed was a fiery ignition.

The crew went along doing their jobs, oblivious to the secret material they were unwittingly laying down.

General Dynamics Private Jet
Cruising Altitude of 33,000 Feet En Route To Washington DC
September 9, 2001

They all had satisfied looks. Not just their faces, but their body language as well. In order to pull off the largest terror event in history while simultaneously pulling the biggest bank heist of all time had significant psychological effects.

Druskin gave Carlucci a wry look and said, “Ok, Frank. Let’s go over this one more time. Mistakes are not an option.”

James Crown looked at the older oligarch to his left and huffed, “Oh, come on Bob, Frank here is the best. Relax.”

Frank eased back comfortably in his chair. He was sure that all the pieces were in place and that it would go off without a hitch. “Ok Bob, let’s lay it all out. But before I begin, let’s hear your side first. You’re the money man.”

Druskin nodded, “Everything looks good, assuming those damn computers do their job.”

Frank and James laughed at the gruff old man’s lack of trust in technology. Bob continued, “Paul assured me that all of the trades will be cleared and untraceable. That’s stocks, puts, options, securities, you name it. That’ll take care of a small portion of what we have in Cyprus and the Caymans. The rest can be used in derivatives trading later on, and that’s when the real fun starts.”

Crown gave a skeptical look and said, “Nothing is really untraceable.”

Frank intervened, “What are they gonna do, search in the smoke signals and ashes? Come on James, don’t be so paranoid.”

Bob gave an agreeable smile. “Ok, Frank, your turn.”

Frank twirled his pinky finger in a scotch on the rocks, “All the assets are in place. The beautiful part is, they don’t have to fly a god damn thing. All they have to do is crowd control. The machines will do the rest.”

Bob asked with keen eyes, “What about air defense?”

“There are a great number of drills scheduled for the same day. It’ll boggle up the chain of command more than enough to keep everyone confused and buy time. And Donnie, of course, won’t take any rash actions.”

“And what about Bush and Cheney?” James asked.
Frank smirked, “They’ll be well handled by their handlers.”

Washington DC
September 10, 2001

Donnie kept a straight face. It was his turn to speak at the podium in front of his fellow official ilk. Deep breath. A little tug at the pink tie and a comforting smile paved the way. Donnie Rumsfeld pulled up all the hutzpah he could muster and announced on C-SPAN, to those who cared to listen:

“Some might ask, how could the Secretary of Defense attack the Pentagon in front of its people. I have no desire to attack the Pentagon. I want to liberate it. By some estimates, we cannot track 2.3 trillion dollars in transactions.”

Part 3

September 11, 2001

Chapter 34

Ptech Headquarters

Quincy, MA

5:00 am

The small computer lab had an eerie hum to it. It contained only a handful of machines, but those machines operated some of the most sophisticated software in the world. Ptech had quite the “A” list of clients, which included the FAA, The Armed Services, The Secret Service, The White House, and various other government agencies.

Two young Air Force Intelligence operatives were sipping their second cup of coffee and taking a break from the screens. They had been specially selected in the previous months to be trained on the use of Ptech software. Now it was time for their first real-time operation, helping to coordinate various national security drills with a multitude of agencies simultaneously. That was the beauty of the Ptech software. It gave inside access to multiple agency networks while simultaneously providing a bird’s eye view of operations in real-time.

A door slammed behind them. A booming voice came over their shoulders. “Coffee break is over. What’s the system status?” It was Michael Vickers.

“Everything appears to be running normally, sir. We are at ready status.”

“Very good. We go live in 30 minutes. Your nation is counting on you.”

“We’re honored, sir.”

About twenty minutes later Vickers checked the status again and prepared to launch the biggest black op in history.

Vickers questioned, “Of the nineteen passengers, how many are slated for secondary inspections?”

“We have eleven who will go through secondary inspections. At least, that’s what their systems on the ground will read.”

“Good, we should have our first two about to go through security at the Portland, Maine airport.”

One of the operatives glanced at his screen and then at a list of names on a printout next to him. It was all unreal to him. Just blips on a computer screen. Part of a military drill. Names of people he would never meet. “Yes, sir. Atta and Alomari appear to be in contact with airport personnel as we speak.”

US Airways Counter

Portland Maine Airport

5:30 am

The ticket agent held firm. He’d seen more than his fair share of huffy passengers over the years. He spoke as plainly and professionally as possible, “Mr. Atta, I’m sorry if it’s caused you any inconvenience, but policy states that you must check-in again once you arrive in Boston.”

Atta clenched his teeth and growled, “I was told one thing when I purchased the ticket, and now you’re telling me the complete opposite. I can’t miss that flight in Boston!”

“Mr. Atta, your flight leaves here very shortly, so I suggest you move along and make sure you board this flight on time. There’s nothing more I can do for you, I’m afraid.” Atta glanced at his shimmering gold watch and walked off in a hurry.

Meanwhile, back at the Ptech lab it was reported to Vickers and Dickerson that the first two passengers had boarded the first flight.

Vickers ordered, “Ok, gentlemen. We must now turn our attention to NORAD. Do you have access?”

“Affirmative, sir.”

“Vigilant Guardian begins at 0600 hours.”

“We’re ready, sir.”

Boston Logan International Airport
6:30 am

Marwan watched impatiently as his partners in crime attempted to check-in at the United Airlines ticket counter. If it weren’t such a serious situation, he would have laughed. Their English was horrible and couldn’t even answer a few simple questions. Why couldn’t they have sent him some muscle guys that spoke English? Was that too much to ask?

“I need ticket,” Hamza Ghamdi said in broken and thickly accented English. The confused ticket agent was holding Mr. Ghamdi’s ticket right in front of his face. “You already have a ticket, sir. I won’t give you another one.”

“I fly today, yes?”

“I need to see your ID, please.” The flustered agent was met with a blank stare. The Ghamdi brothers looked at each other. The agent pointed to her ID badge and said with a painstakingly slow manner, “I....need.....your.....ID.”

Hamza Ghamdi turned his big blockhead to his brother and shrugged his bulky shoulders. They talked a bit in their native tongue and then Hamza finally pulled out his passport. The ticket agent breathed a sigh of relief and pounded away furiously at the keyboard. She wanted to get these two out of her hair at light speed.

Finally, after a few minutes, but what seemed like eternity, the al-Ghamdi brothers were waived on. Marwan exhaled deeply. The other two hijackers, Mohand and Bani had already gotten their tickets. Marwan would be the last.

Next came the security checkpoint. The five hijackers made their way separately through security so as not to draw suspicion. They spaced it out over a twenty minute period. Hamza Ghamdi went first. He went through the metal detector and it let out a screech.

“Please step over for secondary inspection,” the sleepy eyed security agent ordered. The muscular blockhead Arab got a confused look on his face.

“Over here, sir,” pleaded the security inspector as he motioned with his hands. Hamza nodded his big noggin and stepped where he was told. The inspector patted hands down the front and sides of blockhead’s pants. Blockhead’s heart jumped furiously and doubled its speed. The tired inspector patted down the blockhead’s muscular upper frame and waved him through. The one place that was not inspected was blockhead’s back pants pockets, which both contained small knives.

7:20am
Newark Airport Parking Lot

Ahmad and Ahmed took turns slapping Ziad Jarrah in the face in desperate attempts to sober him up. Ahmad gave a vicious look to Ziad and raged, “Ziad, you’re a disgrace! You were out all night again, weren’t you?”

Ziad's eyes twirled in no particular direction and his sunken cheeks managed to mutter, "I just need to wake up, that's all." Then he giggled like a schoolgirl and reached in his pocket. Alarmed, his left pants pocket didn't contain what he was looking for. His eyes popped open with desperation. "Where's my shit?" he wondered aloud. Ahmad rolled his dark eyes and ordered, "Check your other pocket." The flamboyant hijacker reached into his right pocket and there it was, his little baggie of Peruvian Marching Powder. His dark eyes lit up and he made his way to the nearest men's room. They watched as Ziad stumbled along.

Ahmed asked, "Should we go with him?"

Ahmad answered emphatically, "Hell no. I'm not getting busted for that screw-up. Thank Allah he doesn't have to fly."

7:50am

Ptech Situation Room

"It appears all nineteen passengers have boarded successfully, sir," the young agent reported to a pacing Vickers. He gave a glance of disbelief over his shoulder at his superiors. He wouldn't say it because it was just a drill, but he couldn't avoid the feeling that the security test had thus far been a complete failure. How could men with knives get past security without so much as a second look?

"With all due respect, sir, just to be clear. The passengers are real, but all hijacked craft are not?"

"Affirmative." Hook, line, and sinker. It was that simple.

Mike gave a placid look towards the two techies, "Bogey One should be airborne within fifteen minutes. Are you prepared to deviate course of Bogey One?"

"Yes, sir, ready to divert."

World Trade Center

South Tower

Former FBI agent O'Neill was happy to be out of his red tape filled nightmare. So far, he was enjoying his time as head of security at the World Trade Center. He was busy running around this Tuesday morning, making sure staff was ready for an emergency drill on the 97th floor, the home of investment firm Fiduciary Trust. John's big frame hustled as best it could to get to and fro. Making his way towards the elevators, he screamed into his radio, "Hey, I'm coming up right now. We're scheduled to start in ten minutes, so let's hustle up, guys!" A twinge of anger and befuddlement crossed his mind. Why the hell had their been a power down the weekend before a drill like this? And why were there still issues with the security cameras? He was sweating and the drill hadn't even started yet. He thought to himself as he stepped into an elevator and caught his breath, "This is gonna be a long day."

8:05am

The command sequence from Ptech triggered the remote flight system in AA Flight 11, along with some other customized gadgets. An odorless gas slowly snaked its way into the cockpit. Before the pilots knew what hit them, their faces were making like pancakes in the control panel. The preprogrammed remote flight system seamlessly took control of the craft and adjusted the destination coordinates. It also shut off the transponder and disabled the black boxes.

Mohamed Atta looked impatiently at his watch. It was time. He looked across the aisle at the puffy faced al-Shehri brothers. The look in Atta's dark eyes said it all. Waleed al-Shehri calmly crept up to one of the flight attendants, who was busily making refreshment preparations for first

class passengers. Atta followed close behind. Waleed calmly put a knife to her back. Her young face flashed shock. By this time, the other three hijackers had spread themselves out, two more in the middle of the plane, and another in the back. Atta spoke to her softly, "Open the cockpit, don't scream, and you won't get hurt."

The normally bright faced young woman held a mixture of disbelief and horror on her face as she slowly followed their instructions. The sparse occupants of the craft paid little or no attention. They stopped at the cockpit entrance. Upon reaching the cockpit door, she showed reluctance. Atta gave her a strong look, "Don't make this more difficult on anyone. We know you have a key, so open the door quietly and everything will be ok."

Tears started to flow down her sad cheeks and with trembling hands she complied. Once the door was cracked open, Atta made one swoop through the door and slammed it shut. The noise made the frightened victim finally scream. This made Waleed furious. He stabbed her in her lower back and got in a kidney shot, then went up and flayed the neck. She dropped limp and cold to the floor.

Atta came out of the cockpit and started yelling at the sparse crowd, who now were rudely awakened and forced to take notice. "Everybody, we now have control of the plane. We are armed. If you resist us, you will be killed. Everyone just stay calm and in your seats. We're changing the destination." This brought on panic attacks of all sorts. Shrill screams, huffing and puffing, crying, shaking, and everything in between struck the passengers.

One of the other flight crew members lay in the back of the plane. She had been quickly deposed of by Waleed's brother, Wail.

Waleed got next to Atta near the cockpit entrance and whispered to him, "Everything on track?" Atta smirked and replied with a twinge of sarcasm, "I sure hope so, cuz I'll be damned if I can land this beast."

8:15am

Ptech Operations Center

"It looks like Bogey One has adjusted course, now heading to destination 1A," came the monotonous tone.

Vickers asked, "Any response from NORAD?"

"Negative, sir."

"Keep me posted on NORAD's actions. This is imperative to the security of the operation."

"Yes, sir."

"It also appears that Bogey Two has taken off," came another stoic report.

Vickers instructed brusquely, "I want Boston Air Traffic Control monitored as well. Let me know if and when they have contact with NORAD. This is crucial to the exercise."

"Yes, sir, we have ears in Boston and all NORAD sectors taking part in the drill."

Mike was the only one in the room who knew that by activating the monitoring of communications, the system had also been rigged to send out pre-recorded audio messages to the air controllers and FAA headquarters. It also began a sequence of false radar info of multiple phantom flights in order to confuse those involved in the exercise.

Minutes later, a flash alerted the Ptech operatives that Boston was communicating with FAA headquarters.

"This is Boston ATC, Pete Zalewski, calling in to report a possible hijacking."

"We read you, Boston. Please explain."

"Transponder on AA flight eleven not working, radio silent, pilots unresponsive, and strange Arab sounding voices saying they have control of some planes."

"Noted, Boston. Keep your eyes on the situation and we'll do our best from here."

"Communication stopped, sir," came the dry report to Vickers.

8:20am

American Airlines Flight 11

Atta and his crew kept their collective eyes peeled in two directions. One was to keep an eye on their victims. The other was to watch as they made a smooth descent into an old World War 2 Army Airfield in rural Pennsylvania.

The electronically guided craft made a smooth landing on the ancient runway. Murmuring from the shocked crowd filled the air with uncertainty. They rolled to a stop and Atta announced from the front of the plane as the door was popped open, "I need everyone to get off the plane. We're not going to hurt you. Follow me off the plane now!"

Atta deplaned first and ran to get one of the machine guns that had been placed in the airfield beforehand. The other hijackers herded the passengers off. The frightened crowd moved quickly. They didn't know why they were being let off the plane, but everyone on board figured it was better than the uncertainty of flying around with a bunch of violent maniacs. Some even began to feel relief.

That was until the moment they stepped off the plane, Atta was waiting there with a machine gun. "Don't worry, everyone. Just do as I say and you won't get hurt. Please make your way towards the truck." He motioned towards an empty eighteen wheeler sitting at the ready just off the runway. The other hijackers grabbed their guns as soon as they got off as well. The people went without a fight. Within minutes, the plane was empty, the door was shut, and it took off in a hurry once again towards its preprogrammed destination.

Once inside the trailer, the door slammed shut and gas started to flood the interior. The hijackers listened as screams of terror filled the morning air. Once the noise stopped, Atta strode up to the cabin and gave the go ahead sign to the driver. He watched as the truck disappeared into the Pennsylvania countryside. He gave a cocky look to his partners "Let's go!" He motioned towards a black SUV that was waiting for them.

Meanwhile, the agent at Ptech reported, "Sir, Bogey One has left destination 1A and is now en route to its final destination." He took a deep breath and continued, "It also appears, sir, that Bogey Two has adjusted course and is en route to destination 1A."

A few tense drops of time later and the report continued, "Sir, there is a call in progress between Commanders Marr and Arnold at NORAD."

"Audio now!" yelled Vickers.

The voice of second in command of the Vigilant Guardian exercise, Robert Marr, came over loud and clear, "Major General Arnold, we have reason to believe a hijacking is in progress and request that fighters be scrambled from Otis Air Base, sir."

Thinking this was part of the training exercise, Arnold responded with confusion in his voice. "Is this part of the drill?"

"I don't believe so, sir. This is real world."

"Thank you for the update, Commander Marr."

"Yes, sir."

Still confused, Arnold sat back and contemplated the situation. Was this real? There hadn't been a hijacking in years. He took a minute to gather his thoughts. What should he do? He decided to call Marr back and confirm.

"Commander Marr, do you confirm that this is real world?"

"I have every reason to think so, sir. I suggest you contact Otis Air Base immediately."

"Very well, thank you Commander Marr."

Switching communication lines, Major General Arnold talked to one of his subordinates and gave the order to scramble fighters immediately.

8:48am

UA Flight 175 had already been taken control of in the same manner at this point and was nearly finished offloading at the old Army Air Field in Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, Flight 11 was entering Manhattan at full speed.

The artificially controlled behemoth screamed through the air with a roaring vengeance. The air defense of the USA was hacked, compromised, confused, and strangling itself with hierarchical red tape. The busy rush hour streets of Manhattan fluidly rolled on, oblivious to the unfolding nightmare above their heads. People were sipping coffee, rushing to work, scarfing breakfast, yelling at the rush hour traffic mayhem.

Inside the North Tower of the World Trade Center, throughout floors 93 and 100, computers in the offices of Marsh and McLennan were sizzling away and facilitating transactions with banks and insurance companies around the world. Money moved at lightning speed from Cyprus, Dubai, and the Cayman Islands to New York and London via a dizzying array of conduits like Deutsche Bank, Citi, Lehman, Bear Stearns, Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, and hundreds of smaller hedge funds and intermediaries. T-bills were gobbled up and United and American sank like a rock. Securities ballooned in frantic moments of a financial fireworks show. Credit derivatives and subprime mortgages twisted through the ether. And the software used at Marsh and McLennan was one of the hubs for all the action. Ultimately, the maze led to a handful of companies and a handful of people. This financial web would have taken, under normal circumstances, years or even decades to unravel. The orchestrators were not about to take that risk, though.

The soaring bullet continued unabated and with the full force of seismic thunder shredded floors 93 through 99 of the North Tower with miraculous precision and fiery rage. To the occupants of Marsh and McLennan, it was a slow descent into a liquid, scorching end which, for a brief moment, seemed like a snapshot of surreal. Metal and glass fragments rocketed and leapt about in all the directions that chaos would allow.

On the lower floors, it felt as if the earth shook. Most didn't know what to make of it. There was a palpable moment of confusion and disbelief among everyone. Some shrugged it off and went back to work. Others slowly came to the realization that it was necessary to take action. As word spread as to what had happened, the slow pace of disbelief and casual investigation changed to a flurry of fright and mad dashes in infinite directions.

John O'Neill's face froze. Was this it? Was this the attack he had feared for so long? All those warnings. All those years of hunting terrorists. John O'Neill felt the sting of betrayal from his own government when that plane made its historic mark.

John fought hard to swim through the river of chaos that was erupting before him. He ran outside to assess the damage. Smoke was billowing out like demons and a seemingly endless flow of fragments continued to assault the ground. Protecting his face with one hand and looking at the mayhem near the top of the gashed building John exclaimed, "Shit! Holy shit! I've gotta get up there and try to get people out!" In the midst of it all, John heard an announcement come over the automated system. "Evacuation is not necessary. Please return to your office." Not believing his ears, John's head swiveled as he hoofed it to the control room that was responsible for automated communications. Upon storming into the room, two personnel at the control desk looked shocked. "Are you ok, sir?"

"What the hell are you doing?" John asked as he tried to catch his breath. "We're under attack, and you're telling people to go back to work? Shut that infernal thing off!"

Ptech Command Center

“Sir, it appears that Bogey One has made a direct hit on the World Trade Center,” the tech agent reported with a hint of shock in his voice. He turned to face Vickers who was standing stoically behind him. “Thank God this is only a drill, sir.”

Vickers responded in an emotionless tone, “Yes, thank God. What’s the status of Bogey Two?”

“Approaching target, approximately ten minutes out, sir.”

“NORAD’s response?”

“Two fighters have been scrambled from Otis Air Base. It appears they are in a holding pattern over the Atlantic.” He turned to face his overseers once again. “I don’t understand, sir. Protocol is being broken by multiple agencies.”

“That’s for the other agencies to worry about after the exercise. You do your job and don’t worry about what they do. If mistakes are made, so be it. Now carry on.”

A deep sigh came from the young tech. “Yes, sir.”

“Has Bogey Three adjusted course yet?”

“Yes, sir. Its estimated ETA at destination 1A is at 0900.”

Vickers asked, “Let’s have a look at the Secret Service system. Have any communications regarding Bogey One been made to the President or Vice-President?”

Fingers hummed rhythmically on the keyboard. “No, sir.”

The two officers glanced at each other. Their faces said it all. No response from the Secret Service yet? Unbelievable.

Donald Rumsfeld’s Private Dining Room At The Pentagon

Top military brass and select congressmen sat around pressed and polished dining areas. They scarfed down eggs benedict, coffee, juice, and an assortment of meats and cheeses. Donald sat next to his deputy Paul Wolfowitz and across from a couple of representatives. Rumsfeld smacked his food loudly, “Look, Mr. Mica, you have to realize just how important missile defense is. I’m all for strong domestic programs, but defense must be number one.”

Mica didn’t look convinced. He gave a stern look to the smacking defense secretary and replied, “The cold war is over, it’s been over. There’s no justification for spending untold billions on the military anymore. Not to mention your little announcement yesterday. With all due respect, how can we justify greater funds going to the Pentagon, after such mismanagement of money has occurred. Trillions of dollars, unaccounted for?” He shook his head in disgust.

Rumsfeld gave a dark look to his counterpart, “I can assure you, steps are being taken right now to alleviate the accounting issues. Also, keep in mind that perhaps one day an event will occur which will make apparent the need for greater defense. Terrorism is not to be underestimated.”

A silent figure appeared behind Rumsfeld and casually handed him a note. Rumsfeld excused the interruption and took a look at the hand written note, which read:

“A plane hit the World Trade Center moments ago.”

Donald discreetly folded the note, tucked it in his pocket, and went on about his business. Mr. Mica gave a curious look to Donald and asked, “Is there something you need to attend to, sir?” Rumsfeld gave a knowing smile and said, “Nothing urgent. Please, enjoy your breakfast.”

9am
Washington DC

The conference room at the Ritz-Carlton in Washington DC was sparkling. The vaulted ceiling was illuminated and the walls were decorated with a unique blend of ornaments. Everything was maintained in a consistent and orderly fashion by the well-dressed staff. The attendees of the conference were still milling around, taking their places, finding their seats, and glad-handing their business partners. This was the Carlyle Group investors conference.

Frank Carlucci was dressed in a sharp gray suit and was standing along one of the walls in order to avoid too much attention. He wasn't much for social gatherings. His line of work often entailed numerous bendings of the truth, so it behooved someone in such a way of life to avoid social contact when possible. Remembering so many lies could be mentally taxing, especially at his age. When it came time to put on the act, however, Frank Carlucci was as slick as they come. A casual glance at the watch and a satisfied smile. Frank was the only one in the room who knew how much money was being made in that instant.

Frank squinted behind his thick frame glasses as he spotted a person of interest across the room. He began to stride towards the olive-skinned foreigner who spotted him as he approached and gave a warm smile. They gave a mutual bow upon coming face to face. "Shafiq Bin Laden, good to see you."

"Likewise to you, Mr. Carlucci. It's always an honor to speak with you," came the cordial reply.

Frank smiled broadly as they continued to embrace and shake hands. "How's the family business?"

A light laugh came from the slender figure. "Business is good. My family is blessed. How are things for you, Frank?"

"Well, things have been good, but I have a feeling they're about to get a lot better."

A curious brow raised from Shafiq. "Is that right?"

"You've made a wise investment with Carlyle. You'll see." He paused and glanced around the room. "I must go now, Shafiq. It was great to see you."

United Flight 93

Ahmed and Ahmad cast ominous and uncertain looks towards their so-called mission leader a few rows up. Ziad was in a dream-like state. Nobody was sure about the last time he slept. What was certain was that he was now a very weak link in the operation.

Ahmed sighed and whispered to Ahmad nervously, "I'm having doubts. How can we proceed with this fool up there?"

Ahmad shrugged his shoulders and thought it over a moment. What were the options? Could they pull it off without Ziad? With any luck, he might sleep through the whole thing. The problem was that he wasn't sleeping. He was drifting in and out of uppers and downers. "I almost wish they had stopped him at the checkpoint," Ahmad said with disgust. His nerves were starting to eat at him. "But what can we do? If we don't do the mission, we won't get paid."

Ahmed concurred, "Or worse."

They watched in horror as Ziad stood up and wobbled towards the lavatory. A perky stewardess stopped him and said, "Sir, I'm sorry, could you wait until the pilot turns off the seat belt sign?"

Ziad's eyes warbled and he slurred, "It's kind of emergency." The attendant grimaced and relented. They were almost at cruising altitude, so let it slide. Besides, by the looks of him, she thought, he might have to vomit. So Ziad stumbled his way into the tiny, smelly crevice and went sniff-sniff-sniff. He didn't even bother to flush to make it sound real. The upper phase was now

back in effect as he sped up and straightened out his step, turbulence be damned. Ahmed and Ahmad both did face-palms. Ziad gave an overconfident thumbs up as he looked back at his partners.

Ptech Command Center

“Thirty seconds until impact, sir. No interceptors in sight. Bogey Two will strike the World Trade Center South Tower.” There was a frosty taste of uneasiness in the air now. The agents were starting to wonder. How could the greatest military in the world fail so miserably, especially when protecting its own soil?

All three military men kept their collective gaze fixated on the pulsing blips. “Five, four, three, two, one.”

Vickers spoke tonelessly, “What’s the status of Bogey 3?”

Fingers flew on the black keys. “En route to target, sir.” The naive agent took a moment to ponder what he said really meant. The next target in the exercise was the Pentagon itself. He thought of the impossibility. His mind began to drift. What if this had been real?

“Keep your focus,” Vickers ordered with a matching glare. “Prepare Bogey 5 for launch and begin 25 minute countdown.”

“Yes, sir.”

9:05am

Booker Elementary School
Sarasota, Florida

Bush did for the children on this day what he did best at all times in the political sphere. He smiled and acted friendly. Photo ops were his specialty, and today was no different. Who couldn’t love a friendly, sensitive guy spending time with children?

He gave a warm southern smile and greeted the small class of children. “Hey, it’s a real pleasure to meet you. Real nice to be here.” He straightened his tie and glanced at his watch. “What are we going to do today?”

A mop-headed rascal spoke in a high pitch, “Nice to meet you, Mr. President. We’re going to read. Do you like to read?”

“Oh, I love to read. I do it every day, and I think you should, too. What are we reading today?”

A pleasantly plump female teacher happily handed Bush a book entitled, “My Pet Goat.”

Bush beamed some fake pleasantries and elatedly stated, “Oh, one of my favorites! Who wants to read first?”

“I do,” said little mop-head. He started to read proudly as the the president pretended to listen intently. No more than a couple of lines into the book, and one of Bush’s assistants came quietly by his side and whispered in his ear. “A second plane has hit the World Trade Center. America is under attack.”

Bush knew what he had to do and what he didn’t have to do. He had been well coached for many months. He had to wait for instructions, first and foremost. What he did not have to do was take action. He thought to himself that he wouldn’t know what actions to take anyway. Bush nodded to his assistant who discreetly stepped away. Bush continued to listen and wait, listen and wait, listen and wait.

9:15am

NORAD Continental US Command Center

“Have you tried contacting the Defense Secretary?” Robert Marr asked his commanding officer, General Arnold.

“Numerous times,” the general stated.

“There’s another plane that’s suspected to be hijacked headed towards Washington, sir. We need to take action in a matter of minutes.”

The General huffed, “I understand, Commander Marr, but I won’t break protocol. Only Secretary Rumsfeld can order a shoot down of a rogue craft.”

“Or the president, or vice-president,” Marr protested.

“True,” relented the General, who was quickly growing weary. “But I’m not about to break protocol, especially when we don’t have definitive proof what the pilot’s intentions are.”

“Understood, sir.”

The crusty old general slammed the phone down. He never thought he’d actually be in such a predicament. Nobody ever does.

9:25am

Ptech Command Center

“Sir, Bogey 3 is due to hit the target in 12 minutes. Bogey 5 set to launch in 30 seconds.”

Vickers nodded and wiped sweat from his brow. The room wasn’t very big for three men cramped with loads of top-of-the-line electronics. “Very good, proceed.”

Following orders with perfect timing, the young computer operator unknowingly launched a real armed drone from Langley. The drone was preprogrammed to perform a mission. It headed straight for the Pentagon.

“Sir, I’m picking up activity at Langley other than Bogey 5. It appears that two F-16s are launching as well.”

Stunned, Vickers asked, “Who gave that order?”

“Unclear, sir.”

The two tech specs looked at each other nervously. Why did their commander seem upset? Didn’t he want one of these attacks to be stopped?

“What’s the status of Bogey Four?”

“Bogey Four has not yet changed course, sir.”

“It’s not headed to destination 1A?”

“It appears not, sir.”

This was a drastic and unwanted turn of events. Half the mission was complete, as far as Vickers was concerned, but a half-ass job wouldn’t bode well for his career.

“Which way are the F-16s heading?”

“Out over the Atlantic, sir.”

United Flight 93

Ahmad peered around the plane. Some people were snoozing away. Others were reading or involved in conversation. One attendant was busily tending to her duties at the front near first class. “Ok, Ahmed, it’s now or never. Let’s do this.”

Ahmed’s mustache gave some nervous twitches. “Yeah, you’re right.” They looked towards the back of the craft, made eye contact with their other partner Saeed, and gave a nod to get things

rolling. Ahmed whispered to Ahmad, "I'll approach Ziad and try to get him to move. If he's out, he's out. We can do this without him."

Ahmed's lean hands wiped sweat onto his jeans and stood up slowly. "Just act natural," Ahmad instructed. Ahmed went along as quietly as he could, almost in a tip-toe fashion. Ahmad face-palmed. That was not natural. Upon reaching the side of Ziad, Ahmed gave a light tap on the shoulder. Ziad's eyes blinked ferociously. "What, what?"

A scowl beamed from Ahmed to Ziad while he said, "It's time. Calm, nice, and easy."

Ziad jumped from his seat and in a flash of shaky hands pulled a knife from his back pocket. He startled the stewardess and shoved the knife in her face. So much for calm and easy. Ahmed and Ahmad drew their knives and took up their positions in the front and middle of the plane. Saeed drew his weapon and kept the rear in check. Ziad sliced the throat of the stewardess. Chaotic screams and confusion enveloped the craft. Ziad yelled, "We have control of the plane. Stay calm, and no one else gets hurt!" His hands were shaking furiously. His dilated pupils were dancing. Blood started streaming down the aisle from the victim's neck. Ziad frantically searched the victim for the cockpit key and failed.

The rest of the flight crew was being held in the back of the plane by Saeed. Ziad continued as his arms flailed about, "Get me that key!". A little girl in the middle of the plane was crying with a loudness beyond compare. "Shut her up! Shut her up!" Ziad screamed as his mind continued to spiral out of control. "Get me that fucking key now or we start slashing throats!"

A male steward attendant in the back meekly called back, "Ok, ok, here's the key. Don't hurt anyone."

Ziad wobbled a bit and screamed back, "Bring it up here, slowly, and open the door!"

He did as he was told and approached Ziad carefully. The attendant's face quivered as he came near Ziad.

"Go, open now!"

He shakily managed to get the key in and the door open. As soon as the door was open, Ziad slashed his throat. Ahmed yelled, "What the hell are you doing?"

Ziad ignored the distress of his fellow operatives and kicked the door open. He found the two pilots unconscious, just as had been planned.

Ahmed cried out, "What are you doing?"

Ziad looked over his shoulders with acute paranoia and shot back, "I'm flying the plane!" He slammed and locked the door. Ahmed didn't know what to do. There wasn't much he could do. A drunk, sleep-deprived cokehead had locked himself in the cockpit with the key. All he could do was attempt crowd control and hope for the best.

"Ok, everyone, we have control of the plane. We'll be going to a different destination. Don't worry, we don't want to hurt you."

One guy in the back of the plane noticed how nervous Ahmed was and how fucked up Ziad was. He shouted back, "You've already killed two people! Why the hell should we believe you?"

Ahmed didn't have an answer. The guy was right. You don't start off a takeover with brute force like this and scare the crowd. Only threaten violence, never use it, unless it becomes necessary. Now all that was out the window. He looked at his watch. Less than 30 minutes to go and they should be safe on the ground.

9:36am

The autonomous drone had carved its way through the air with absolute precision. It now was shadowing American Airlines Flight 77 over Washington DC. They were flying low and furious through the humid summer air.

"What's the status for Bogey 3 and Bogey 5?" Vickers asked anxiously.

"Will reach target in less than two minutes, sir."

Vickers mind was racing. What if there was something he was missing? What if it struck the wrong part of the Pentagon? The chaos that would be unleashed would be out of his control, and as far as he knew, out of his employer's control. The accuracy of the latest in autonomous technology was about to be tested on a grand scale.

"30 seconds, sir."

Vickers big frame was sweating profusely. He licked his lips with anticipation and stared with a sort of bleak hope at the computer monitor.

The drone was flying below radar, near tree level, directly under the massive 757, which remained more than one-thousand feet in the air in order to serve as a giant decoy.

A switch went off. A green light flashed. All sorts of metallic and silicon wonders fulfilled their mission and launched a hellfire missile into the symbol of American military supremacy.

The heartless autonomous machine kept following its flying partner towards the Atlantic.

"Sir, the Pentagon has been struck by Bogey 3." He paused and thought of the enormity of such a statement. "What about Bogey 5, sir?"

Vickers face went blood red and he huffed, "That's on a need to know basis. Stay focused. Any further questions will be severely reprimanded."

"Yes, sir."

Once safely over the Atlantic, the auto destruct went off in the drone and it exploded into near indecipherable fragments. A much larger explosion took place from the pre-planted bombs on board Flight 77. The mystery of the craft would sink to the bottom of the sea.

9:45am

Ptech Operations Center

All three were silent as they listened intently to the agitated voices coming through electronically. "What do you mean, you don't know where he is? America is under attack, and you don't know where the Secretary of Defense is?" A fuming General Arnold couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Rumsfeld's top aide, preppie-faced Stevie Cambone, was nearly lost for words himself. Speaking from deep inside the Pentagon's Executive Support Center, he answered hastily, "I don't know, I've been trying to reach him since the explosion. He's not in his office, nobody knows where he is."

General Arnold took a moment to review his options. Only a president or the secdef could order a shootdown, and now there was a confirmed fourth hijacking, along with numerous other dubious reports coming through FAA chatter. President Bush was being evacuated from Florida and was having trouble with Air Force One communications. "Where the hell is Chaney?" Arnold growled.

"I don't know. I imagine he's in the emergency center under the White House, per COG protocols." Cambone pushed back his chocolate mop of hair and continued, "Things are getting hectic around here, I gotta run. The whole Pentagon is being evacuated."

Arnold closed his eyes with disappointment as he heard the click.

Flight 93

"What the hell are you doing?" Ahmed shrieked. His voice was a couple of octaves higher than normal as he witnessed the unthinkable in the cockpit. The only two pilots on board, so far as he knew, were knocked out cold and slumped over. Ziad Jarrah was taking shots of whiskey and playing with buttons.

"Relax," Ziad said, followed by a hardy snort of the nostrils.

Bug eyed Ahmed yelled, "How can I relax if you're fucking with the controls? Get the hell out of there!"

"We're about to land, you worry too much," Ziad slurred.

Ahmed had had enough. He put his knife back in his pocket and lunged at Ziad. He didn't want to kill him, just get him away from the controls. Ziad sucker punched him in his big brown schnoz but Ahmed countered with a furious barrage to the ears. A wrestling match ensued. Ahmad retreated towards the first class section and took up a defensive position. His thin frame and a four inch blade was all that stood between any would-be heroes and the cockpit. The flight crew had to take into consideration that, with both pilots unconscious, would taking control of the plane really do any good?

Ziad finally got a good grip on Ahmed's collar and slammed his head into the control deck multiple times. A hard and immediate drop was immediately felt by all. Ziad gulped. Passengers screamed. Ahmad and Saeed exchanged glances of uncertainty. Ahmed, out cold, slouched over near the pilots.

Ziad panicked. His chemically challenged brain and nerves shook with uncertainty and terror. His sweat-doused palms furiously grabbed at knobs and switches. He threw his thin, round glasses off in disgust. They were in free-fall over rural Pennsylvania. Ziad Jarrah then switched gears into uncontrolled rage. Fists were slung into metal. Feet obliterated plastic.

Passengers prayed and cried. Memories flashed before everyone's eyes. Regrets were confessed. Food and drinks spilled and scattered chaotically. Time slowed down for an instant. Finally, the falling techno-beast performed its final act. Fire and fuel provided an unintended explosion in the middle of nowhere. All perished immediately and souls were released.

A bag of firearms sat unmolested in an airfield not far away. An empty 18-wheeler didn't receive its flesh and bone cargo. And somewhere a crazed scientist awaited experimental subjects who never came.

Ptech Operations Center

"Wipe that dumb look off your face and tell me what the hell just happened," Vickers fumed.

A weary tech gave a slow answer, "It appears, sir, that Bogey Four is down."

"What do you mean, down? Details, damnit! I want details."

"Sir, I don't know. It could have been shot down, but I don't have any information regarding the disappearance. But according to all available information, Bogey Four has terminated."

Vickers heart bounced rapidly in his chest. That was most certainly not supposed to have happened. How could this be? How can a flight just disappear? There was nothing he could do about it. He could already feel the heat coming from his bosses. One thing was certain. Whatever happened now was out of his hands. There was only one more order of business.

"I've got to make a private call. I'll be right back."

"Yes, sir."

Vickers quietly stepped into the hallway and peered around to make sure no one was within earshot. He dialed his cell. The other end picked up but said nothing. Vickers ordered, "Two on the way out." Click.

Stepping back into the roasting little command center, Vickers congratulated his men. "Well done, men. Shut down all local systems and you are relieved of duty."

"Thank you, sir. It was an honor."

The young tech-savvy order followers shut all systems down. They exchanged a curious look as they made their way to the exits. Something was eating at them. What just happened? A stark feeling of knowing too much washed over them briefly. They parted ways in the parking garage. A quick ambush came from special ops soldiers. Immediate jabs to the neck incapacitated

both in an instant. The autopsy would show both died of heart attacks. The special ops soldiers cars exploded days later.

9:58am

World Trade Center South Tower

O'Neill was running on fumes. He'd been moving his husky frame around for nearly two hours in straight panic mode. Time stood still as he tried to manage the chaos as best he could. First responders were now flooding the area and John was helping direct their selfless services to where he thought they would be most effective. In stark contrast to heroics, he'd also been witness to the darkest plunges of death. People on the top floors had given up and flung themselves towards the base of the concrete jungle in a desperate attempt to end the slow burn of suffering.

In the midst of running up a sweltering staircase for the umpteenth time, John heard a series of explosions come from above. He stopped dead in his tracks and peered up with heart-wrenching disbelief. His heart was saying one thing, but the logic in his brain told him another. He didn't want to believe what he just heard, but the undeniable, objective truth was that a series of high-powered explosions was rippling through the synthetic guts of one of the proudest symbols of Western affluence and dominance. John closed his eyes and looked upwards in a melting moment of surreal emotion.

While the explosions occurred, a near simultaneous collapse of the grand tower's inner workings crumbled into a helpless freefall. A mega-cloud of dust and debris overtook the dumbfounded mix of humanity that was swarming below. Flesh and bones of hundreds of soul vessels were crushed underneath the undeniable force of megatons.

American Hospital

Dubai

12:46pm EST

Weakness had begun to overtake him despite the best treatment available at one of the finest hospitals in Dubai. Death's hand had begun to be a palpable feeling. Marfan Syndrome had weakened his heart and his respiratory function. At this moment, however, the sheer audacity of what he was witnessing brought a jolt of energy to Osama Bin Laden.

He smiled at the small TV directly in front of his bed. It wasn't a smile out of happiness. It was more like pure marvel. Intense eyes stared at the small screen which was flashing the latest news from NBC. One of the World Trade Towers in New York had collapsed. The talking heads were reading their script.

Paul Bremer peered into the camera and boldly announced, "Bin Laden was involved in the first attack on the World Trade Center which had as its intention doing exactly what happened here, which was to collapse both towers. He certainly has to be a prime suspect. But there are others in the Middle East, and there are at least two states, Iran and Iraq, which should at least remain on the list of potential suspects."

The weak scapegoat peered over his left shoulder and grinned. The man in black next to the bed stood silently and showed no emotion.

"Such hubris is amusing, is it not?" Osama mused. The detached figure didn't budge. Osama looked back at the TV. He couldn't believe his eyes. He laughed and talked to himself, "I am the bad man. What a story!" Continuing a childlike giggle he asked, "Are people gullible enough to believe this?"

Stone face kept still.

The narrative had begun. The psycho-techno professors of reality repeatedly drove the terror and the enemy into the psyche of the populace.

Looking again to his watcher, Bin Laden spoke with rigid irony, "Business is business, I suppose."

Plum Island Off US East Coast
8pm

A woman in business-casual attire screamed, "What the hell is happening? I'm an American citizen, damnit!" The helpless victims were squeezed like sardines in various traps of diverse sizes. No one knew where they were. Some were still unconscious from the chemical soup sleep they'd been forced to endure in the back of an eighteen wheeler.

Indifferent, black clad guards stood nearby with machine guns. The sparse number of guards seemed to share common physical traits, such as olive-colored skin, almond eyes, and jet-black hair. "Do you speak English?" panted one doughy inmate. He grabbed the bars with desperation as he panted and begged, "Please, whatever it takes, let us go. Please, I've got money."

Out of the occupants' view was a sterile, soulless room with appallingly bright illumination. At a large black desk sat a frosty and methodical man in a sparkling white coat. The desk had stacks of impeccably organized papers placed in a perfectly sequential order. Professor Rogue intently studied the flight manifests. He pursed his lips out and straightened his glasses. With a twist on his face that elucidated tisk-tisk-tisk, he said, "A shame that not all of our specimens made it. Such a waste."

The head of security for the operation stood over the eager professor and watched and waited patiently. This was the professor's show now. With a malevolent upward twist of the lips, the Professor ordered, "Very well, bring in the first specimen. It's going to be a long night." He pointed to a name on the list.

A moment later and a lean young woman was brought in kicking and screaming. The guard brought one of his big mitts back as if to slap her, but Rogue interjected, "No, no violence. We are civilized here." Looking to the frightened prisoner, Rogue gave a mock smile and offered, "Perhaps you'd care for something to drink. Water, coffee, green tea?"

Uncertain eyes danced around the room. She didn't know what to say. Rogue looked at the soldier and ordered, "Two cups of coffee." Then he looked to the young lass, "Sugar?"

No verbal response, only shaking and squirming.

"Two cups of black coffee," Rogue ordered. Turning back to his first victim, Rogue started, "So, your name is Kathy. Kathy Martin, is that correct?"

"How do you know my name?" she asked with a shiver.

A smug professor continued, "Well, I know more than your name, my dear. I know you're 28 years old, married, have a 3-year-old son, have never had any major health issues, hold a mid-range position within the Department of Health and Human Services, and."

"Please stop!" she shrieked and cut off the profile reading.

"You might be wondering what this is all about, am I right?" Rogue leaned forward on the desk and looked her dead in the eye. "You are a woman of science, are you not?"

Cold silence.

"I'll take that as a yes. If you're a woman of science, then you should be happy to know that you are about to make a great contribution to scientific discovery which will, in time, be for the greater good. Isn't that beyond wonderful, my dear?"

She narrowed her crystal blue eyes at him.

"I can see you still don't understand. Normally I don't do this, but considering that you're a woman of science, I'm going to take the unprecedented action of allowing you to choose which field to enter into."

He smiled at her and gave a dart-like stare. He looked her up and down and continued, “Considering your stellar physical condition, there are two options of the contribution you can make. You can contribute your well-maintained vital organs or you can volunteer for a clinical study, which might involve new chemical compounds, or other, shall we say, more exotic creations.”

Her heart jumped and pounded. Cold sweat overtook her. She wished she were dead. The guard came in with the coffee and set two steaming mugs on the desk. Holding out a welcoming hand, Rogue offered, “Please, enjoy your coffee.”

“Anyway, as I was saying, if you choose to contribute organs, then of course your life will terminate quite soon. However, if you partake in a clinical study, you have a chance at continuing your existence. I must say, though, that it might be possible to lose some of your mental and/or physical capabilities during the study.”

Fear turned to rage and with a clenched jaw the young mother fumed, “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Rogue laughed at the reaction and said, “My dear, you should be honored that I’m allowing you to choose. I will select the fate of all the others. That’s how it usually goes, anyway.”

Sad blue eyes twisted towards the chiseled, well-armed guard. Then tears flowed unabated. Feigning sympathy, the prim-looking professor sighed and said, “Oh, my dear, I know. I know it’s not easy, the sacrifices we make for progress. I’ll tell you what. I’ll let you have some time to think about it. Perhaps tomorrow you’ll be more clear headed and able to make a proper decision.”

He motioned to the guard who grasped and pulled the weeping woman away.

White House
Oval Office
Washington DC
8:45pm

Bush casually leaned back in his modern throne with feet thrust up on the vintage desk. His beady eyes scanned the script. Chuckles and winces came and went. He raised a brow and called to his press secretary, Ari Fleischer, “How the hell am I supposed to keep a straight face when I read this? People are really gonna buy this garbage?”

Ari threw his fidgety hands in the air, “Of course they will. This is the easiest speech of your life, are you kidding me?”

Bush’s lips curled down, “Why is that?”

Ari approached and put a hand on Bush’s shoulder, “Look, people are scared. As long as Big Daddy says he’ll protect them, then you can’t lose. Besides, do you know how many psychologists, sociologists, and other experts make these things for you?”

Confused, Bush replied, “No, well, not really. It’s been a long day, ya know.”

Ari grimaced at the thought that this was actually believed to be the most powerful man in the world. “I know it’s been a long day. Just read the speech and try to act upset.”

“Act?” Bush countered. “I am upset. You know how many flights I had to take to get back to DC today?”

Ari rolled his eyes and walked off.

9pm

Bush maintained a serious composure. The downward slant of his droopy eyes helped. His blue suit and gray tie accentuated the mood. It was a perfect manipulation in motion. “Immediately following the first attack, I implemented our government’s emergency response plans.”

Mesmerizing blue glow infiltrated countless homes. The imagery and linguistics were received by all in a uniform pattern. Sofas and easy chairs were filled. Glasses of booze flowed freely. Confusion reigned. They were fearful. They wanted a protector. Mothers gripped their children. Fathers gave reassuring looks. They all looked to their protector in the blue glow.

Bush continued, "The search is underway for those who were behind these evil acts. I have directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."

"This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace. America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time. None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world."

The foundation was set, ingrained in the memory of billions. The psycho-military-financial complex had carte blanche to proceed.

11:59pm
Presidential Suite
Watergate Hotel
Washington DC

"What a day," Rubenstein beamed. He was the boisterous one of the bunch. Men of such persuasions as these typically held a more humorless countenance. Rubenstein was the exception. "Come on, guys, smile for once. What a day!"

A few faces gave in to forced curls of the lips. Marafino's pudgy face looked bemused, "I'm here to discuss business. I'm not a flowery type like you, Ruby."

Rubenstein's face narrowed, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Frank interrupted, "Ok guys, business, let's talk business. Bob, tell us some good news."

Everyone turned to the reserved Bob Druskin. Frank pushed, "Come on, Bob. Did Paul get his job done? Did all the transactions go through?"

Druskin took a slow sip of his neat whiskey, "When the markets open next week, I'm sure everyone here will be pleased."

James Crown winced at the understatement, "Bob, don't be so modest. Making black money suddenly appear is no small feat."

Druskin said dryly, "It's only a beginning. It's a good start, but there's still much to do."

Louis Gerstner groaned, "Oh, come on Bob, do you ever take a break?"

Druskin stated with ominous vigor, "My associates are very demanding." Befuddled looks were exchanged around the table. Who was he referring to? Before anyone could shoot a question at Bob, he continued, "So let's talk about moving forward. In the next few days, the president and congress will authorize war in Afghanistan. At that point, the funds from Special Access Programs can begin to be brought down to more moderate figures. Just as importantly, the necessary legislation for data collection must go through." He paused and squinted as if trying to recall something. "What's the name of that bill again?"

Louis Gerstner answered with an ironic twist, "The Patriot Act."

This made Druskin smile. He loved such absurd word games. "Ah, yes, The Patriot Act." Everyone had a good cackle at the ridiculous name. Druskin narrowed his eyes at Frank, "I want to be certain that bill is passed. Frank, make sure the proper congressmen get the proper messages in order to ensure the Patriot Act becomes a reality."

Rubenstein tapped his fingers nervously on the gleaming table, "Come on, Bob. They're scared shitless at it is. It'll pass."

Druskin kept his glare fixed on Frank's beady eyes, "I want assurance." Frank stirred the frosty rocks in his glass, "Consider it done."

Druskin continued, "I'm sure we'd also agree that some assurance is given that the media behaves more properly."

"What are you getting at, Bob?" Crown asked.

"Did none of you see the BBC flub today? They announced that Building 7 collapsed, before it was brought down. Not only that, but to top things off, the announcement was made with Building 7 actually in the background!" Druskin hammered his fist into the wood and shook the table. He took a deep breath and tried to compose himself. "Childish mistakes like that are what screw things up, and it will not be tolerated."

Rubenstein tried to lighten the mood, "On the flip side of that, I must say that the executive messages were quite effective."

Marafino stuffed an olive in his mouth and agreed, "Yeah, Louis. Your PR team over at McKinsey is nothing short of magic."

Druskin relented, "I'll give you that." He turned back to Frank, "However, another slip up I'm curious about must be addressed. What the hell happened to that last plane, Frank?"

This wasn't a question Frank wanted to hear. He didn't have an answer, and he was afraid that Vickers wouldn't have an answer either. "I'll be looking into that."

"How comforting," Druskin seethed. "Now, let's hear about covering the tracks, shall we?"

Frank spoke earnestly, "The FBI is swarming all over the airports, the crash sites, the FAA control centers. Everything is being collected and classified."

Crown asked, "And witnesses?"

"Witnesses will be dealt with as the need arises."

Druskin kept hammering, "And that mountain of debris? It's a mountain of evidence, and must be a priority."

"It's a White House priority, and a priority for New York. It'll be handled more than expediently."

Rubenstein chirped, "Ok, ok, enough. I'm sure Frank has everything under control. Let's talk about the good news, Bob."

Bob smiled, "Ever heard of something called a credit-default swap?"

Too much whiskey had been consumed to make much sense of such a non-sensical thing. All sat silent. Bob continued his satisfied grin, "You will."

1am

In a dingy apartment in Brooklyn there was an ominous glow from a single lamp. Kenny's day was still a blur. He was holding a glass of ice next to his forehead as he slouched in a rickety wooden dining chair. What he'd witnessed the previous day had him spooked and he was doing a terrible job of hiding it. The quick huffs and puffs of hyperventilation had stopped, but he was still bug-eyed and shaky.

The voice he loved came wrapped in a thick Brooklyn accent as he received loving strokes on his bald noggin, "Come on, Kenny, it'll be ok. You'll feel better if you tell me what happened. It's hard for all of us, just please, tell me what's freakin you out so bad, honey."

His eyes danced around. Did he really see what he saw? Was it a dream? There were others he needed to talk to. If what he saw was real, what significance did it have? What did it all mean?

"Come on, Kenny," the sweet voice urged.

He hadn't been able to speak for hours. He was too petrified. Reluctantly, some dry-mouthed verbalization came forth, "Explosions. Lots of explosions."

"Ok, good Kenny. Go ahead. What about explosions?"

"I was in the basement of the North Tower after the planes hit. I was trying to help people as best I could." He froze and bit his lip. She rubbed soothing hands on his back. "That's my Kenny, such a big heart."

"There were explosions in the basement."

Confused, she questioned, "So what does that mean, Kenny?"

He turned his head up to lock eyes with her, "If a plane hit 90 stories up, then why would there be explosions in the basement? It doesn't make sense."

She squinted her eyes and thought for a moment. He was right. But how could that be? She got a chill and pulled up a chair. A tear streamed down his cheek. He sniffled and looked into his girl's eyes for comfort, "It means there's more to what happened. I gotta talk to the other people that saw what I saw."

"Kenny, you gotta do more than that. You gotta tell the police or somethin, maybe even talk to a reporter. This is serious."

They clasped hands. Their minds raced. Kenny was just a janitor, but he had to speak out. People had to know there was more to the story.

3am

Mia awoke with a start. It sounded like a struggle. Az was yelling quasi-coherently. She tiptoed into her only friend's room. Az was tossing and turning, flailing his arms about and murmuring unintelligible bits of language. His head was pouring cold sweat. She wasn't accustomed to seeing the strongman so vulnerable.

She softly got into bed next to him and put a warm arm over his chest to offer comfort. She stared at him with wide eyes. She was afflicted with terrible nightmares as well, so she had the highest degree of sympathy for his suffering.

She pressed herself firmly against him. He calmed a bit and stopped gibbering. She caressed his smooth scalp and kissed him softly on the cheek. He'd helped her so much, and now she had the chance to offer comfort in return.

Az suddenly jolted up, startling Mia. He looked around nervously and panted desperately for air. He looked at the frightened Mia. "What are you doing here?"

Mia sat up and answered softly, "I, I was just trying to help. You were having a nightmare. Are you ok?"

Az looked away and tried to recollect. "It's like jagged pieces of a puzzle. Nothing is clear."

She moved closer to him and grabbed his arm, "Go on."

"There's a little boy. He's frightened. There's a terrible storm raging outside. The night is blacker than one can imagine. Two friendly faces, a man and woman, appear to comfort me."

"Who's the little boy? Who are the people?"

Az looked at Mia hard, "I think it's me. The man and woman, I'm not sure. Their faces are much more distorted. A flash makes the storm disappear and then the boy is in a strange place, a very bright, surreal corridor. It seems to never end. As the boy walks down the corridor, there are bizarre faces, all yelling and barking contradictory orders. The boy is confused and doesn't know what to do. A blue wave washes over the boy, and he disappears."

Mia pulled him closer and rubbed his back. "What do you think it means?"

Az threw up his hands and shook his head, "I'm not sure. Dream interpretation isn't my specialty."

Mia was happy to see his sense of humor could shine through such a bleak moment. She hugged him tighter as he glared at the floor. "Let's lay down, Az. I'll stay with you."

Part 4

Chapter 35

Plum Island

September 12, 2001

The door burst open. One man struggled to physically stop the other. The guard was panting. "I'm sorry, sir. I tried to stop him."

Undaunted, Professor Rogue looked at the two brutes disapprovingly. He looked back at the young boy he was interviewing and said calmly, "I'm sorry, my boy. You'll have to go outside for a moment, ok?" The disillusioned child nodded and stepped to the door. The guard took the boy out and left the professor with the other bulky specimen.

Professor Rogue stepped quickly to the intruder and slapped him across the face. The brute turned his cheek and winced. The professor's face showed scorn, "What are you doing here?"

The hulking figure had deeply sad eyes and said, "I need my medicine. Please, I need my medicine." He was sweating profusely. The professor slapped him again. "It's not time for your medicine yet. You know that! Why are you disturbing me?"

"I don't know who I am anymore! I need my medicine!," came the whimpering answer.

Rogue looked at his subject curiously, "Did you have the dreams again?"

A sulking affirmative.

The professor narrowed his eyes and grabbed the shaken man by the shoulders, "Listen to me. You did bad in coming here. You're a very bad boy! You'll get your medicine at the usual time and at the usual place. Do you understand?"

In a full blown cry now, there was no response. Only tears from the linebacker physique. The professor walloped him across the cheek again, "Do you understand?"

A reluctant and slow-motion nod of the shaved head. The professor looked fiercely into his subject's watery eyes. "Now, that's a good boy. I understand that you're very busy, but you can't change your medicine schedule."

Unabated tears continued as he responded, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The professor pressed the shaved head against his white coat and gave paternal pats on the head, "It's ok. I've got to get back to work now. You go and I'll see you back in London."

An uneasy nod and snuffle, and the deep state soldier swiftly vanished. Professor Rogue made a mental note about his subject. Once the dreams became more frequent, it was a sign of memory recovery. If a soldier recovered his memories, it could lead to very compromising circumstances. His usefulness was starting to wane.

Fort Detrick, Maryland

Midnight

An old-school jeep was making an approach to a highly restricted area of Fort Detrick. The driver rubbed the sore on his cheek. That last pop from the professor had some sting to it. The jeep pulled up to the security gate. The brute, dressed in perfectly pressed military regalia, leaned over the door and greeted the security guard.

The guard greeted him with perplexity. "Can I help you?"

The driver smiled confidently and said, "Yes, they're expecting me, and I'm sorry to be running a bit late."

An uneasy look came over the guard's face. "I'll need to see some ID and check the visitor's list."

“Of course,” the driver handed ID to the guard and smiled. The guard went to his desk and checked an approved visitor’s list for the day. No names matched the ID. He walked back out and said, “I’m sorry, your name isn’t on the list.”

“There must be some mistake. Could I have a look with you?”

The groggy guard relented and came back with the list. Once within arm’s length, the driver pointed to the list and said, “Oh, I see, right there.” And then he popped the guard in the nose, slammed the door into him, cracked an elbow over the back of the head, and gave him a sleepy injection just for good measure.

After opening the gate, he drove through a dimly lit landscape of innocuous buildings with a smattering of quaint gardens. He hammered the breaks upon reaching Lab 123. Another guard was startled to see the late night visitor and was quickly ambushed and subdued. Punching in a key code, he waited impatiently. Red light achieved. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.” The code didn’t work. When all else fails, smash. He smashed the keypad with a crushing elbow and heard an electric sizzle and pop. He forced the door open and continued his quest.

Downstairs, through a tunnel, around a maze of blacked out office windows, and finally, the target. Room 3A. This time the code worked. He slipped into the lab and found the hermetically sealed sand-colored powder. With the powder tucked safely into his briefcase, he slipped out quietly.

As he mazed back through the way he came, he was confronted by a long faced fellow in a white coat. “Oh, my, I didn’t know we were having visitors tonight.” He was a remarkably cheery fellow. The military man did his best to ignore the scientist, but was cut off. “I’m Doctor Brown, and who might you be?”

Split-second decision. Make small talk? Nah, too annoying and time consuming. A hammeresque roundhouse made quick work of the bubbly scientist. The military man didn’t have time to waste. Missions had to be completed before he could get his medicine.

Chapter 36

Central Park
New York City
September 13, 2001

Kenny peered around. He could count on one hand how many hours of sleep he'd had in the past two days. He rocked nervously back and forth on a tattered wooden park bench. He swallowed a swath of sticky air and tried to calm his nerves. He didn't take notice of the spectacular late summer day. There hadn't been much enjoyment lately.

"Kenny?" came a curious young female voice. Startled, Kenny looked up and saw a youthful, slim figure standing before him. He stood and tried to force a salutary smile. "Hi, Kenny, I'm Diane Seez from the New York Post. It's nice to meet you."

An unintentionally strange look overtook his pale face. She looked at him curiously and asked, "May I ask why you're looking at me so funny?"

He sighed and said, "Yeah, geez. I'm sorry, just a little nervous. And I expected you to be older, at least, you sounded older over the phone."

Ms. Seez blushed, "Ok, well, shall we sit and have a chat?"

"Yeah, and thanks for meeting me," Kenny said as they took seats on far ends of the bench.

"So, Kenny, you were a janitor in the North Tower, is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And you were working during the attacks?"

Another positive.

"But you saw something strange while you were in the basement?"

He shook involuntarily. "Yes, there were explosions."

"So, what do you think caused the explosions?"

"Could have been bombs. I'm not sure."

"Bombs?"

"That's right," Kenny confirmed as he looked over his shoulder.

Diane took a moment to process the information. She pursed her bright red lips out and continued, "But if there were bombs, that would change everything."

Kenny shakily nodded. Diane bit her lip, "And that's why you're so freaked out."

More affirmative shaking.

"Did others witness this?"

"Yep."

"How many?"

Kenny looked off into the distance for a moment to envision and calculate. "At least ten."

"You mean workers?"

"Yeah, cleaning staff, security, parking, and maintenance crew. The maintenance crew wasn't regular, though. They would come and go as needed."

"Maintenance crew, huh? And what kind of maintenance were they doing two days ago?"

"I think it was electrical, but I'm not sure."

"Did you recognize any of them from previous maintenance jobs?"

"Nope, not one."

Diane took a deep breath. This was a fantastic story, but she couldn't print it based on one man's testimony. She needed corroboration. If she could get it, this would be the story of the century. "Kenny, you sound credible and I'd like to speak with you again sometime. However, I need to talk to my editor. If he gives me the go ahead, I'll need to speak with others that were there to verify your account of things. I want to personally thank you for stepping forward though. I hope things work out for you. I know this must be so hard."

He forced another smile. “Thanks for your time, Diane.”
“Thanks, Kenny. We’ll be in touch.”

Chapter 37

September 17, 2001

It took a great deal of effort to keep his hands under control. He was still two days away from getting his medicine. Shaky letters appeared on the envelope. It looked like the work of a five-year-old, and not a very astute one, at that. The mask on his face was helping to cause a flood of sweat melt off of his skin. He looked over at the pile of powder. He wondered to himself. Why was he doing this? He needed medicine, that's why. That was the only way to make himself feel better.

He carefully measured the powder and unsteadily delivered it into the white envelope. It was carefully sealed with water. He gave it another look to make sure everything was in order. Addressed to the New York Post. Fake return address in New Jersey. One stamp. He threw it in his backpack with the other assortment of mail and headed out for the nearest mail drop.

48 hours later

Kenny was staring at the TV in his dingy gray living room. He couldn't believe the news. After speaking with Diane from the New York Post, he had started to get some sense of relief. He wasn't alone. Someone would listen to his story. And now this? Anthrax attacks at media outlets and congress? What the hell was going on in this country? Not only that, but one of the victims of the attack just happened to be the newspaper that he'd spoken with. They were the only ones who had given him the time of day.

What the hell was anthrax anyway? The TV said it was a deadly chemical. Another act of terror. A shadow emerged in Kenny's kitchen. He thought his girlfriend was at work. What day was it? Things on his mental plane were still fuzzy. "Hey babe, that you?"

Tight silence.

Cautiously and curiously, Kenny softly made his way up and around the corner into the kitchen.

"Gotcha!" she screamed with delight.

Kenny flinched and grabbed his chest, "What the hell are you doing sneaking up like that?"

She gave a playful smile, "Oh, come on, loosen up. I miss the old Kenny." She made a pouty face and narrowed wishful eyes at him.

"You haven't seen the news yet, huh?" Kenny asked with incredulity.

"I don't know how much more news I can handle."

Pointing to the flashing screen, Kenny suggested, "Take a look for yourself."

There was a live conference on Capitol Hill denouncing the attacks. Kenny hastily pointed, "Take a look at the ticker at the bottom of the screen."

ANTHRAX ATTACKS AT MEDIA OUTLETS, NY CBS, NBC AFFILIATES, NY POST, MULTIPLE DEATHS REPORTED

She froze. Kenny shot a derogatory glance, "Not so funny now, huh."

"Shit, Kenny, I'm sorry. Oh my God, the New York Post! That's where you."

He cut and finished the thought, "Had my interview."

Her frozen face and bugging eyes robotically turned to Kenny. "Kenny, do you think that."

He cut her off again, "I don't know, but something ain't right. I'm gonna keep trying, though. I'll keep making calls. Eventually, someone will make my story public."

Chapter 38

City Of London
October 26, 2001

An impeccably dressed shadow stood with stillness under a grand archway. The gray-haired shadow admired the view provided by his perch in the heart of The City. Bob Druskin stood in the shadow expectantly. The shadow spoke with a thick upper-crust English tone. "Mr. Druskin," the dark reflection began, "you are to be commended." Bob lowered his head respectfully, "Thank you, sir."

The Patriot Act had just passed by a landslide in the US Congress. All of the spy technology that had been put carefully and methodically into place over decades of the Cold War was now ready to become operational. Not only could it operate, but the people would welcome it with open arms to fight a nebulous enemy. This enemy, terror, was being and was to continue to be imprinted on the psyche of the masses through daily doses of scientifically crafted propaganda.

"But this is only the beginning," the slim figure said.

"Yes, sir. I understand."

The figure turned and scowled, "Do you?"

The normally brusque and calculating Druskin felt a mild quiver. He understood the dynamics of the financial machinations that were happening, but he wasn't clear on future objectives. "I must admit, there are some things which I would like to be clarified."

A grim tone answered, "I didn't call you here just to pat you on the back, Mr. Druskin. I'll ask you a question. You are one with quite the intellect, which is one reason you've been chosen for this most important endeavor, so I feel confident you will grasp what I am about to explain."

Druskin pulled a long breath. The shadow turned his back on Druskin and again fixed a gaze on The City. "An enormous swath of securities that are being sold are contingent on a strong housing market. When that market begins to slump, what do you imagine will happen?"

Druskin cleared his throat, "The securities will become worthless."

"And how many dollars do these account for?"

"An astronomical amount, and they will increase exponentially over the coming months and years."

"Correct, Mr. Druskin. Many key financial institutions are helping to bring this about, and you have been instrumental in that process. So now the question is, Mr. Druskin, what will happen when those securities become worthless?"

"That's what I'd like clarified, sir. Many banks will become insolvent."

The shadow turned back to Druskin and cackled, "Ahhh, Mr. Druskin, your intellect delights me. Yes, that's true. Many banks will become insolvent. What will happen when those banks collapse?"

"It would create quite a distressing social climate, at least for a short period."

"It was a trick question, Mr. Druskin. True, without intervention, what you say would happen. However, we are not going to let that happen, Mr. Druskin. Would you like to know how?"

Druskin narrowed his eyes, "I'd be quite interested to know, sir."

"I thought you might. When the time comes, the American people will be called upon to save the banks. After all, international financial institutions are the bedrock of society, are they not, Mr. Druskin?"

Druskin sighed, "You might say that."

"You might be wondering how the banks will be saved. Congress will appropriate the funding necessary to make this a reality."

“You’re talking about countless trillions of dollars, many multiples of the annual US GDP. If I may be so bold, sir, what on earth would all that money be used for?”

The shadow turned and gave a wicked smile, “That is none of your concern, Mr. Druskin. Suffice it to say that you will be well compensated for your efforts.”

“Very well, sir. There is one other thing that could use clarification. I’m unclear as to why such data collection is necessary. Surely, it cannot simply be for gaining an advantage over pure financial concerns.”

The occult figure gave a sly look, “Mr. Druskin, do you trust the average man you see in the street?”

“Absolutely not.”

“And why is that, Mr. Druskin?”

“Well, I’m not quite sure.”

“Perhaps because the average man is prone to animalistic tendencies. He is not rational. His irrational behavior is not to be trusted. He cannot govern himself.”

“I see,” Druskin relented thoughtfully.

“Men like us, Mr. Druskin, cannot afford to have so many irrational creatures running around on our planet, now can we? We must save man from himself, and in order to do that, we must always be watchful and make sure he behaves in the proper manner.”

“And how can people be brought to accept such invasion of their privacy?”

Another cackle came from the shadow, “Ahh, Mr. Druskin. I’m afraid our conversation is over. You go along and do your job, and I will do mine.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And always remember, Mr. Druskin, you are not immune to watchful eyes.”

Chapter 39

Headquarters of The New York Post
NY, NY

Arms crossed and rocking back and forth, not just from nerves, but from a fermenting of anger that had built over the past few weeks. This was Kenny's new world. Diane was out of touch since their meeting at Central Park. No other media outlets would listen to his story. He'd heard all sorts of excuses. Not credible, not big news, not interesting, disrespectful to victims and their families. Kenny noted the irony. How was investigating a crime disrespectful to the victims? Wasn't it natural to seek resolution?

A middle aged man with a hurried look approached and stood over Kenny. "Yes, can I help you? I was told by my secretary that you were looking to share a story about the nine eleven attacks."

Kenny stood and offered a handshake which was unenthusiastically accepted. "Actually, I already spoke with a reporter from here a few weeks ago, Diane Seez."

The hurried face dropped and grew stiff. "Oh, well, Diane doesn't work here anymore."

Surprised, Kenny pried, "Oh, why is that? And, I'm sorry, your name is?"

The reluctance grew more apparent, "I'm not at liberty to say what happened with Ms. Seez. I'm really sorry."

Kenny narrowed his eyes and twisted his lips, "Well, ok, I understand, but perhaps someone else would be interested in publishing my story. I heard explosions in the basement of the North Tower."

A hand of caution went up. Diane Seez had been in a fatal car accident. The anthrax attacks happened days later and there was an unspoken chill permeating the news organization that it was time to move onto other stories.

"I'm sorry, I don't think that there would be enough interest in a story like that. Good luck to you, though."

Kenny scoffed. Not a big story? It was blockbuster. It was a mystery. What Kenny didn't think about, at least not consciously, was that it opened up a can of worms that nobody was willing to touch.

Undaunted, Kenny persisted, "I beg to differ. You might double your readership with a story like this. And I'm not alone, there are other witnesses."

The reporter gave some paranoid looks over his shoulders, "Look, a while back I spoke to Diane about this story. I remember quite clearly. All the witnesses she tried to contact refused to speak."

"What? That's ridiculous! I just spoke with one of the security guards last week, and he said he'd talk. He knows the story needs to get out, and we're not alone!"

Kenny was starting to get visibly shaken. The nervous reporter lowered his voice, "Look, this story isn't going to get touched. I gotta go now. I'm really sorry, but I can't talk anymore."

He scurried off and disappeared into a maze of cubicles. Kenny kicked the flimsy chair to his side and walked out befuddled. What would he do next?

Chapter 40

Crown Residence
Chicago
November 5, 2001

Mr. Druskin peered around the living room as he awaited his host. He admired the works of art adorning the walls. It appeared that James Crown was a renaissance man. "The simpler things in life make all the difference, don't they?" Bob turned his monopoly-man face towards the voice and saw the tall host standing in the archway entrance. "Thanks for coming, Bob. Please, come this way to my private meeting room."

They made their way down pleasantly lit wooden corridors and vaulted ceilings. Upon reaching the meeting room, Crown offered a drink. "Scotch, please," Druskin requested dryly.

James dutifully poured some healthy shots and they took seats facing each other. "Bob, I don't want to waste any of your time, so I'll get right to it."

Bob smiled cordially and nodded, "That is appreciated, James, and I'm always interested to hear what a man of your stature has to say."

James took a swig, "Well, I've been reviewing some of the numbers for these new investments, the mortgage backed securities."

Bob locked his eyes into James, "Yes, it's an exciting new development, isn't it?"

With a forced nod of courtesy, James went on, "Yes, it is, shall we say, innovative. However, what really drew my attention was the sheer quantity of what's being bought and sold, not just in our institutions, but across the board."

Bob feigned perplexion, "I'm sorry, James, I don't follow."

"You see, Bob, it seems that if the current rate continues, it will be a gargantuan bubble which, when even the slightest amount of defaults begin to happen, will trigger an unimaginable crisis."

Bob leaned forward, "James, could you please be more specific. I don't quite see what your concern is."

James leaned in closer to Bob, now only mere inches away, "When this bubble pops, it will wreck the entire system. We're talking about sums of money that are enough to buy the whole world, and then some. It's almost unfathomable."

Mr. Druskin leaned back and dabbed his pressed shirt while he chuckled. James Crown didn't quite know what to make of the old man. How was wrecking the system, their personal cash cow, funny? "Is something funny, Mr. Druskin?"

"No, James, I suppose not. I apologize for my distasteful behavior. I see your point and understand your apprehension, and it's good that you brought this to my attention, for it shows how well focused you are."

James took another swig, "So now I suppose my question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"You just told me that you understood the problem."

"I did no such thing. Please, James, let this rest here tonight, between you and I. You have my assurance that you will not lose in this endeavor, so long as you are wise in the actions you take, or don't take, is that clear?"

"Bob, it seems that you are inferring that I should ignore this and keep my mouth shut. Is that right?"

Mr. Druskin stood up and kept his knowing eyes on Mr. Crown, "Goodnight, James."

Rock Creek Park
Washington DC

“For once, you’re requesting I talk to you instead of the other way around. How does it feel, Dovey?” Frank chided his reluctant partner.

Dr. Z grimaced, “Very funny, Frank. This is serious.”

Frank kept a watchful eye on a silk-skinned jogger, “Isn’t it always? How can I make you feel at ease, Dovey? Don’t tell me it’s about the Pentagon audit.”

“It’s about the Pentagon audit. Can you at least humor me and look at me when I’m talking, for fuck’s sake?”

Frank turned with surprise, “Dovey, I’ve never heard you talk so rough before. This must be serious.”

“Frank, I’ve been looking into the past few years and, even without all of the paperwork that was destroyed in the attacks, it’s still off the charts mind-boggling.”

The indefatigable Carlucci didn’t flinch, “Your point being?”

“Frank, where did all that money go? We’re talking about multi-trillions, and that’s only what there’s record of. I can only imagine what went up in flames.”

Frank’s face grew sharp, “Do yourself a favor and don’t imagine things like that.”

“But Frank.”

He was cut off curtly, “No buts, Dr. Z.”

Dov raised his voice, “How am I supposed to present a report to congress about the accounting problems and how we’re fixing them if I don’t at least have some type of remotely plausible answer to give them.”

Frank bit his lip and went tisk-tisk-tisk. “I thought you were more cunning than that, Dovey. Perhaps I overestimated you.”

This time Dr. Z interrupted, “And do you know where all that money went?”

Frank got red and barked in Dov’s face, “No, I don’t, and I imagine that there are very few people who know where every god damn cent went! It’s not my job to know, and it’s not your job either! Your job is to give a report to congress, and that’s it. Do you know why I’ve survived and thrived so long in this world? Because I know what questions to ask and what not to ask. I know when to speak, and when to shut the fuck up. Do you understand?”

“How about this, Frank. Why don’t you just tell me what to do, and I’ll fucking do it. How about that?”

Frank started laughing uncontrollably. He gawked around for a minute and then leaned in close to Dov’s ear, “Tell them what they want to hear.”

“That simple?”

“For fuck’s sake, yes, that simple.”

“And if some of my audit team start asking questions?”

“Then get rid of them. Think you can handle that?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Wrong answer.”

“Yes, I will.”

“Goodbye, Dr. Z. Always a pleasure.”

Washington DC
June 22, 2002

“Jesus, Frank, slow down!” Rumsfeld begged. The sleek black Mercedes twisted with swiftness through the sparse late night traffic. Carlucci relished the thrill and had a permanent grin strapped to his face.

“Live a little, Donnie! Ya gotta take risks once in a while!” Frank roasted his former college buddy. The SecDef’s tense body language spoke volumes. “This might not be the best time to tell you, but there’s something really important that needs your attention.”

Frank glanced over at his tense passenger, “Will it wipe the grin off my face?”

“I sure as hell hope so, ya lunatic!”

They both had a belly laugh and Frank twirled the wheel with problem-child delight. Rumsfeld explained, “Ya see, Frank, as I’m sure you’re aware, there’s a lot of public pressure bubbling up for an official investigation into the attacks, especially from witnesses and families that were affected.”

Frank smirked, “Yeah, so? Let the rabble bubble all they want.”

Donnie scoffed, “Frank, it’s not that simple. Damn it, you’re not in politics, so how the hell can I make you understand?”

The senior aged racer downshifted and showed teeth, “That’s right, Donnie. I stay in the real world, where things get done. I’m not out to win a popularity contest.”

“Shit, Frank, now neither am I, but old Georgie boy is starting to have ideas.”

“An original idea, now this I gotta hear.”

“There’s also a lot of opposition to invading Iraq. So George came up with the idea that maybe we should have an investigation to appease the people. This’ll give us more leverage to move into Iraq with less opposition. Not only that, but the results could be released just before the 2004 election, which would help keep the administration in office.”

Frank slapped a wrinkly hand on the wheel, “I can’t believe I’m hearing this!”

“Why is that, Frank?”

“Little Georgie actually had an idea that isn’t half bad.”

“It’s not?”

The Mercedes coasted off an exit ramp and purred at a lonely red light. “I suppose an investigation would help on multiple fronts, like you say, Donnie. Looks like I’ve got some more work ahead of me.”

“You work more than the devil himself,” Rumsfeld quipped.

“Indeed I do. One more thing, Donnie. About those witnesses.”

Chapter 41

July 4, 2002

Az paced casually around the dingy digs. So much clutter. How did people live like this? He took notice of a picture placed prominently on the wall above the sofa. They looked so happy. Why couldn't he find such happiness? There they were, a young couple, having a snowball fight. The looks on their faces spoke volumes. They were content with such simple things. Az thought to himself that, perhaps, if his life had started differently, he too could find such simple pleasure. Az's mind went to Mia. Perhaps they could have peace and simple pleasures some day.

Attention shifted to the fresh corpse on the sofa. Her blond hair was flung over her face. It was a bloodless kill. Just a simple injection to the neck. Az wondered aloud, "Why am I here? What have these people done?"

He was still waiting. He loathed double kills. But it was the nature of his job and the medicine still had control of his mind. One day, he thought, he could free himself. But that day was not today.

He heard footsteps and a click of a doorknob. Az didn't even try to hide. He was tired of hiding and sneaking around. Besides, he knew that his target wasn't a physical threat.

Kenny froze as he entered the tattered living room. With a finger to lips Az stated calmly, "Don't scream. It won't help."

Kenny's heart leapt. Tears started streaming when he saw the love of his life on the sofa. Az felt sorry for him, for all of them in the room, actually. "I'm sorry to have to do this."

Kenny started stuttering, "Sss-ss-ss sorry? Wh-wh-what do ya-ya-ya mean?"

Az kept his eyes locked on his frightened prey, "I have to kill both of you, but I don't really want to."

Kenny tried to breathe. Kenny was choking on tears. "You have a choice, you don't have to do anything. Why? Why? Why?"

Az looked away for a moment, "I don't know why."

"Do you even know my name?" Kenny demanded.

Silence swept the room. "Or her name?" Kenny continued as he went to kneel next to his beloved.

Az's eyes went soft. "Take a moment to say goodbye." He then watched as Kenny wept uncontrollably and caressed his fallen lover. Az questioned his motives again. Why was he killing people he didn't even know the names of? It didn't make sense, yet, he couldn't control the impulse when an order was given. It was almost all he'd ever known. Change is so difficult.

He raised the pistol and double tapped Kenny in the head. A methodical arrangement of the scene was made to make it look like a double suicide. Pills on the floor. Prints on the gun. Az performed like a machine and disappeared like a phantom.

Upon arriving at home, Az was surprised to see Mia still up. She was sprawled out on the sofa in a pink nightshirt. He tried to be nonchalant, "I'm surprised to see you're still up so late."

She gave a twisted look and approached him, "What are you, my father?" His strong face showed disapproval. She pointed a thin finger at his shirt, "What's that spot?"

"What spot?"

She touched it, "That spot." A red finger pulled away and their world changed. She stepped back, "Oh my God, is that blood?"

Flashes went through his head. The double tap must have left a double splatter. It was sloppy work on his part, a sign that he was slipping. Or was it that his sudden desire to quit his line of work due to ethical implications was becoming a distraction? Either way, this was not the perfect phantom soldier that he once was. Phantoms didn't get caught, especially by their twenty-something year old girlfriends.

He wanted to lie, but couldn't. What was the point? Besides, it might be for the best. "Yeah, that's blood."

Stillness and silence formed a brief barrier between them. "Are you bleeding? What happened?" broke the silence.

"No, I'm not bleeding."

She took another step away and fear began to shake her inside. "Then why is there blood on your shirt?"

He took a deep breath and went to sit on the sofa. He motioned for her to join him, "It's time I explained some things to you." She gulped with terror. Just when she had started to begin a life and escape her own turbulent past experiences, her life was now being enveloped in this frozen moment by terrifying uncertainty.

"I'm not going to mince words. You must know the truth. I'll start from the beginning so you can understand the full context of what I'm about to say. When I was a small child, my parents were killed in a war. Shortly thereafter, I wound up at a kind of refugee shelter. It was there that I met a scientist who changed my life. That scientist was the most consistent adult figure in my life, so naturally, I looked up to him in a bizarre sort of way as a parental figure. However, he chose me to start on a path, a very dark path. From that point forward, I was brought up in a militaristic environment, trained to be an efficient killer. Not only that, but I was experimented on and to this day, the drugs they used to make me what they wanted me to be, are still in control. I must have the drugs, or I feel I will die."

She wept. It took a lot to draw tears from Mia. Her past had created very thick, callous skin, but she wasn't ready to hear what her lover and protector had just told her. Not only the present ramifications made her weep, but also the similarity to her own story. Her parents had died in war and she had been selected for her path by people and powers she didn't understand.

"I'm so sorry, Mia. I want to rid myself of this disease that I have, but I don't know how. I'm afraid of the consequences if I quit my job. I wanted to tell you, but it's so, so hard."

Her face was two shades paler than normal. She laid a wet cheek on the comfort of a plush cushion. "What's he like?"

"The scientist?"

Her long face nodded.

"He's tall, thin, long face, upper-class English accent, a bit wild-eyed, icy blue eyes. Probably now in his seventies. Why do you ask?"

Distorted flashes of memory fragments shot through her mind. She, too, had been drugged up with all sorts of chemical cocktails in order to make her more compliant. A blurry memory of a mad scientist flashed through her head, "Well, aren't you a pretty little one?"

She shivered and Az gently touched her shoulder. "What is it?"

"I think," she said as she focused on her faded memories, "there's a chance we know the same scientist."

Az's sharp head jolted back in shock. How could that be? What were the odds? "There are too many scientists in this world, there's no way. The odds are too great."

She narrowed her eyes, "Old English scientists who pluck war victims for nefarious purposes. That narrows it down a bit, I'd say."

She had a point. Could it be? Shock, anger, and disbelief washed over Az and made his muscular frame tremble. He had grown to resent Professor Rogue because he resented being a murderous slave to his masters. This, however, was a level of hate exponentially higher. Could Rogue also be the one responsible for Mia's traumatic experiences?

With his back turned on Mia, "I have to know."

"And if he is?" Mia cried.

Turning around to face Mia's sorrow, "I'll kill him."

A pause let that hypothetical reality sink in. Mia stood and took a cautious step forward.

“What would they do?”

“I’d have to run.”

“I’d go with you,” Mia moaned.

“I won’t let you put yourself at risk,” Az protested.

She caressed his face, “You’re all I’ve got.”

Chapter 42

9/11 Commission Meeting
June 2003

The crew of politicians who had been chosen to find the devilish details of truth in the attacks of September 11, 2001, were up to their eyeballs in disconnected data points and classified cases. Most were veterans of The Hill and were not shocked or even dismayed at the political shenanigans surrounding the haphazard investigation. However, on this particular day, one member, Max Cleland, had had enough. He was frustrated at countless omissions and obvious cover-ups that were taking place. He refused to sit idly by anymore.

Cleland stared down Director Zelikow and went off in his distinct southern drawl, "So let me get this straight. Most of the hijackers were Saudi nationals. There is a government contractor with computer access to countless agencies, including the FAA, that is majority owned by a Saudi by the name of Al-Qadi. Al-Qadi is known to have links to the Bin Laden organization, and we can't investigate that company? Not only that, but we're still paying them!"

Zelikow turned to Vice-Chairman Lee Hamilton with an undisturbed look. Hamilton, also a director at defense contractor BAE Systems, held a poker face. Turning back to the feisty Cleland, Zelikow asked, "What is the name of the company you're referring to?"

Cleland shouted, "Ptech! I've sent you abundant documentation on the subject!"

The impervious Zelikow explained, "Ah, yes, Ptech, now I remember. Yes, it appears that Ptech is a very sensitive area, a matter of national security."

Cleland burst, "Who the hell said that? How is that national security?"

Zelikow dryly said, "Mr. Cleland, please try and contain yourself. We are all professionals here, are we not? Is there anything more, Mr. Cleland, before we move on?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, there is," Max huffed. "Why is all the video surveillance from the attack sites classified? Why have only a limited number of FAA records been released? Why do some of the alleged perpetrators of the attacks have links to the CIA? Or what about all the suspicious trading going on on Wall Street in the days leading up to the attacks? Can we look into those financial records, or is that a matter of national security, too? I can go on all day, Mr. Zelikow, all god damn day!"

Hamilton interrupted, "That won't be necessary, Mr. Cleland. We've heard quite enough from you for one day. Perhaps it would be best if we take a recess."

Cleland stood and fumed, "This is a damn cover-up if I've ever seen one. And it's a damn disgrace! I'm going straight to the president on this, just you wait."

Chapter 43

Kizer Pharmaceutical Laboratory
London England

Az was in his typically cold sweat. He tried to control his grunts and groans as he staggered through the halls. The sounds made him feel as though he were a beast. He clenched his jaw and gasped for air. Almost there. Rage pushed him forward to meet Professor Rogue one last time.

He charged into Rogue's office as he panted and tried to control his emotions. Rogue smiled cordially and welcomed his pet soldier. "Glad to see you made it. That's a good boy, right on time for your medicine."

Az wheezed, "Yes, please professor. I need my medicine."

Rogue laid out a welcoming hand as he stood, "Please, have a seat, my boy." Az did as he was told and collapsed into a chair. Rogue disappeared for a moment and came back with the usual blue liquid in a large syringe.

"I've been worried about you," Rogue said as he plunged the needle into Az's bulging bicep. Az noticed that the blue liquid's color was a bit darker than normal. "I'm sure you have."

Within moments Az began to normalize. His breathing calmed, the sweating stopped, the muscle pains dissipated. He was back to his old self.

Rogue patted his subject on the head, "You're looking better already."

"Yes, thank you, professor. Before I go, there's something I need to discuss with you." This caught the white-coat off guard. It was highly abnormal for a subject to ask questions. Not completely unheard of, but certainly out of the ordinary. "Yes, anything for you, my boy."

Az stood and reached into his back pocket. He pulled a photo out and held it to Rogue's face. "Tell me, Professor, do you recognize her?"

Rogue pursed his lips out thoughtfully, "No, I can't say I do. Why do you ask?"

Az took a step towards Rogue and kept a chiseled gaze, "Are you sure she doesn't look familiar?"

Rogue gulped and took a step back towards his desk, "Vaguely familiar, perhaps. I'm not sure. I'm an old man, you know."

Az took another long stride into Rogue's face, "Have you done any work in Bosnia, professor?"

Rogue's breath went short, "I've done work all over the world, my boy. What are you getting at?"

The vengeance seeking soldier's voice became hotter, "Bosnia, in 1996?" The lanky old man was now backed up as far as he could go. He was trapped against his desk with a man half his age and many times his strength staring him down in the face.

Visibly shaken, Rogue spoke, "I, I don't know, it was around that time, but I don't recall for sure. Please tell me what you're getting at!"

"So it's not just soldiers, professor? You play God and send people to their fates. We are nothing but resources to you, is that right?"

Rogue now got angry and lashed out, "Damnit boy, you have no right to do this! I command you to leave at once!"

The photo of Mia remained in the air, "You sent this girl into the depths of hell. How many other lives have you destroyed?"

A desperate man of pragmatic science shouted desperately, "You're mixed up, boy! You have no idea what you're talking about!"

A blade snapped out of Az's pocket and went to Rogue's throat with cat-like quickness, "Professor, you are going to die. I am giving you the opportunity to confess."

Shaking and crying the professor shouted, “What? Confess what? What do you want me to say? You don’t understand.”

Face to face with the man he once held as a father figure, Az plunged the blade through a trembling throat. A righteous fountain of bloody vengeance spewed out of the old man’s body. Mixed emotions washed over Az. This was his first kill that had made him feel. Pulling the blade out, he began to weep and an old body fell to the floor.

Time flew faster than normal as Az sliced and diced his way to the airport. There wasn’t much time. Kizer would have other assets looking for Az and Mia within 24 hours.

One Month Later

Az laid with Mia quietly. It was a rare moment of solitude. They’d been bouncing from place to place for a month since Rogue’s death. They’d changed their physical appearance multiple times and gone through just as many passports. They were both pleasantly puzzled at the fact that Az hadn’t been getting his normal withdrawals from the lack of drugs. They both held cautious optimism that he would be healed and that one day they could settle down somewhere and try to make a life.

“Are you tired of running?” Az questioned softly as he gazed into her eyes.

Mia curled closer to him, “Yes, but as long as I’m with you, I can handle it.”

“We won’t have to run forever.” Az glanced at the TV and something caught his attention. Mia noticed a change in demeanor, “What is it?”

Az grabbed the remote and turned up the volume. A picture of Professor Rogue was on the screen for an instant and then it flashed to a dry CNN voice, “In the late Professor Rogue’s honor, the Rothschild Foundation and The Royal Society will be making scholarships available in his name at his alma maters, Oxford and M.I.T, respectively. Professor Rogue died a month ago from natural causes. Friends and colleagues both praised the late professor for his contributions and dedication to the scientific community.”

Mia and Az locked eyes. The report was salt in their wounds. What kind of world did they live in? One where such monsters are venerated. How could this be? Mia kissed him softly on the forehead, “I’m going to make some tea. Would you like some?”

Az nodded thankfully. The dry reporter continued, “In other news, a member of the 9/11 Commission stepped down today due to what he called ‘cover-up tactics by the administration’.”

Az laid back on the soft and cozy white comforter and flicked off the TV. His mind went off in various tangents and snippets of memories from his life, which now seemed so surreal. He closed his eyes slowly and sunk further into otherworldly dimensions.

Mia came in with a steaming cup of black tea, “One sugar and a little milk, just the way you like it.”

No response. “Are you sleeping? It’s the middle of the day.”

Silence.

She set the tea down on the nightstand next to the bed and crawled next to him. “Wake up, silly. It’s the middle of the day.”

Coldness.

Now tension built in Mia’s soul as she noticed his lack of breathing. She whimpered, “Wake up.” Grabbing his wrist, “Wake up, wake up, wake up.”

Checking the vacant neck pulse, “Wake up!”

She shook and cried uncontrollably. Her rivers of tears dripped on his heart. The soldier had outlived his usefulness. The dark blue liquid from Professor Rogue had done its job.

Chapter 44

City Of London
December 2003

The shadow was under the illuminated archway again. He stared outside at a gloomy English winter day. He spoke with dark conviction, "Remarkable, Mr. Druskin, isn't it?"

Bob Druskin stood with his hands locked behind his back in a respectful manner. "What's that, sir?"

Motioning to the outdoors the shadow spoke, "This time of year makes me think of nature and how ironic it is."

"Ironic sir?"

"Yes, so much death is necessary to bring forth things necessary for life."

Druskin nodded in agreement. The kingmaker turned to face Bob, "And so it is with human affairs. It's time to take the next step, Mr. Druskin. Do you know what that step is?"

Bob looked at the shadow's penetrating eyes, "No, sir. I can imagine, but I don't know definitively."

The thin old shadow smiled ruefully, "Of course you don't, that's why you're here. It's time for you to have a talk with our friend Mr. Greenspan at the Federal Reserve."

Bob's brows shot up. This was huge. He knew exactly what was coming next but waited to hear directly from the horse's mouth.

The wrinkly shadow continued, "The U.S. housing market has become much too inflated, wouldn't you say, Bob?"

Bob answered, "Some might say that."

"Mr. Druskin, you will speak with Alan Greenspan and make him know how imperative it is to raise interest rates over the next couple of years."

Bob took a deep breath. He knew this day would come, but it didn't seem real until that moment. The top of the banking pyramid was pulling a massive trigger. The money supply would shrink. Jobs would be lost and shortly thereafter, houses. And once all those home loans started defaulting, the trillions of debt-laden derivatives would implode. The debt-demolished banks wouldn't go under, though. They would be rescued by the American taxpayer. It was a marvelously contrived financial coup. And now the first domino was about to be flicked.

Druskin replied, "Yes, sir. I'll have a chat with Mr. Greenspan. I'm sure he'll understand."

The shadow gave a wickedly knowing smile, "I know you will, Mr. Druskin. You have done great work thus far and we have a great deal of confidence in you."

Bob lowered his tone, "I suppose that all the key institutions will be preserved."

The shadow gave a stark look, "Mr. Druskin, some will win, and some will lose. Good day, Mr. Druskin."

"Good day, sir."

Part 5

Chapter 45

2004-2007

The tragic magic act continued. Wars raged in the Middle East while the fear-induced spending spree of the American people fed the pockets of the deep state fat cats of the murder industry. All of the top defense contractors were raking it in with no end in sight.

Meanwhile, The Federal Reserve raised interest rates, which made it more difficult to get loans. This heavy reduction in the money supply made the real economy slowly shrivel up, while the house of cards Wall Street economy continued its multi-trillion dollar binge

By 2007, mountains of debt came due but nobody was there to foot the bill. The bottom card of the house was pulled, and the controlled demolition was underway. Trillions in mortgage-backed securities became worthless. Mortgage lenders, hedge funds, and investment banks worldwide started to crumble under a mountain of worthless paper obligations. Long standing stalwarts of the Wall Street gang like Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, and Merrill Lynch started to feel the pinch. The big fish like JP Morgan and Bank of America started gobbling up their smaller banking brethren, but that wasn't enough. Soon it spun out of control so much that governments were expected to intervene.

City of London

September 24, 2008

Bob Druskin was in awe of the shadow. How could he not be angered or even the least bit upset at the news? The shadowy deep state string-puller turned to Druskin, "Bob, you seem tense. What's getting at you?"

Druskin swallowed hard, "Well, sir, it's just that the news is quite shocking, if I do say so myself. Apparently the American congress is going to reject the banking bailout package."

The shadow smiled knowingly, "Yes, Mr. Druskin, I understand. However, it's just a bump on the road, that's all. Those clapping seals will come around, don't you worry."

"How's that, sir?"

"The same reason they always come around. They're all compromised. Can you name one that doesn't profit immensely from Wall Street, one way or another?"

Druskin gave pause, "Well, no sir, not many, I imagine."

"So all that's necessary is to shock them a bit. When the markets open on the twenty-ninth, we'll give them a good scare. Some of our friends, Mr. Druskin, are prepared to make that happen. I suggest you make the proper arrangements for your own personal well being."

"Thank you sir, I'll make the proper preparations."

Aftermath

September 29, 2008

A massive wave of sell-offs plunged the market 777 points and spooked Wall Street Nation. Congress had indeed rejected the blank check the bankers were seeking. Now the consequences were raining down from the pits of centralized debt-laden hell. Traders on the floor of the NYSE clutched their chests and tightened jaws as over one trillion in liquidity vanished from the computer screens.

Congressmen felt the sting. They hadn't obeyed and now were being taught a lesson by their money masters.

Bob Druskin shook his head in amazement. The shadow watched patiently and intently.

In the first week of October, the international banking titans got their blank check from the American people. The world was now indebted to a handful of bank owners. The financial coup rolled full steam ahead.

Michael Vickers went on to become a director at defense contractor BAE Systems.

The U.S. defense budget more than doubled from 2001 to 2011, from just over 300 billion to nearly 700 billion.

Bob Druskin, after leaving Citibank, went on to become a board member of the Depository Trust And Clearing Corporation. The DTCC sits at the heart of the financial world and provides trillions in clearing and settlement services for Wall Street and other markets.

Vincent Marafino remains on the Board Of Directors at Lockheed Martin Corporation as of 2017, a company he's worked for since the 1970s.

Frank Carlucci remains at the Carlyle Group, as of 2017.

David Rubenstein remains a co-CEO at The Carlyle Group, as of 2017.

Louis Gerstner remains an adviser at The Carlyle Group, as of 2017.

James Crown remains a director at General Dynamics Corporation.

In 2001, the U.S. national debt was 5.7 trillion dollars. It has skyrocketed to 20 trillion as of 2017.

Opium production in Afghanistan in 2001 was roughly 200 metric tons. By 2007, this had shot up to over 8,000.

Special thanks to my sister who gladly helped with editing.

